

THE AUTHOR of *Grand Hotel* turns to the American scene for this dramatic story of two totally different women: the beautiful but indolent and lazy musical-comedy star, Marylynn, who had everything she wanted; and Bess Poker, who lacked beauty but whose brains and perseverance were responsible for Marylynn's rise to fame, although her own chance for love was sacrificed along the way.

From the first day that Bess met Marylynn their lives had intertwined. Bess saw the potentialities in this helpless, stranded, starry-eyed youngster and staked herself and everything she was and had and ever could be on Marylynn's success.

Bess was reconciled to the vicarious enjoyment of everything a woman wants through Marylynn. She even gave up Luke, the song writer whom she loved. Then Marylynn married and decided to give up her career, and Bess realized that this meant the end of everything she had planned, literally the end of her life. Her way out precipitates a situation that is exploited to the full by Vicki Baum's magnificent storytelling.

This novel was serialized in Collier's under the title of "The Long Denial."

MORTGAGE ON LIFE

BOOKS BY VICKI BAUM

MORTGAGE ON LIFE · HOTEL BERLIN '43 · THE WEEPING
WOOD · MARION ALIVE · THE SHIP AND THE SHORE
SHANGHAI '37 · TALE OF BALI · SING, SISTER, SING
MEN NEVER KNOW · FALLING STAR · HELENE · SECRET
SENTENCE · AND LIFE GOES ON · GRAND HOTEL
MARTIN'S SUMMER

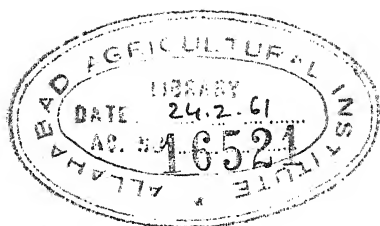
VICKI BAUM

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ON LIFE



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Garden City, New York

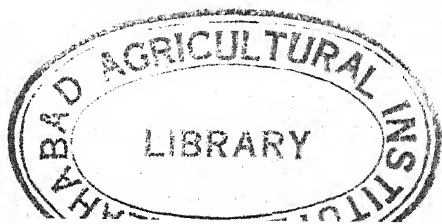


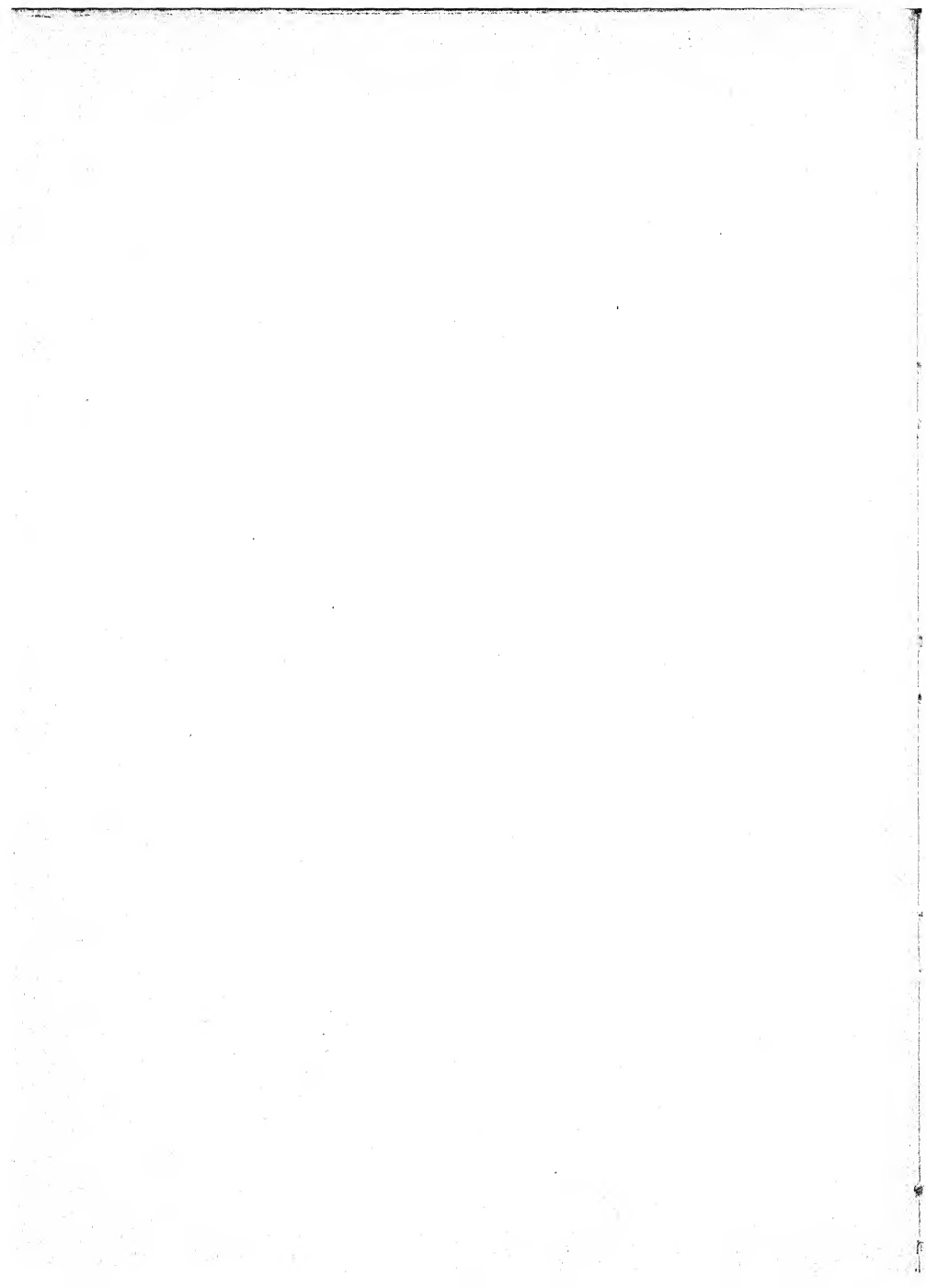


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MORTGAGE ON LIFE





POLICE HEADQUARTERS," desk sergeant O'Leahy said into the phone, glancing at the same time at the wall clock and putting down 1:18 A.M. on the pad in front of him.

The voice of the woman at the other end of the line sounded casual, almost bored—or maybe only very tired. Methodically he started to write on his pad.

"Elizabeth Po . . . yes, I got it. P-O-K-E-R. Elizabeth Poker, that right? Forty-one Sutton Place South. All right. Now, what would be the trouble, lady? What? Somebody's been shot? Well, why didn't you say so right away? I mean . . . Who? Marileen? Marileen Who? You don't mean Marylynn? THE Marylynn? The singer? The musical-comedy star? Killed? Jesus, I only heard her on her radio show to-



night. All right. Hold everything. Our men will be right there. Yeah, an ambulance too. Say, you wouldn't have any idea who did it?"

The tired voice at the other end said: "Yes, I did. Myself." And then there was a click and the phone went dead. . . .

After putting down the receiver, Bess Poker stood for a moment listening into the complete stillness of the house. No rain yet. All day long it had been unbearably hot, and under its sweaty blanket of clouds the city had been chafing, panting, tossing, waiting for the rain to break. There had seemed to be a moment of relief as she had fired the shot, a coolness, and beyond the roaring inside of her ears something like the calm soothing sound of a thin summer rain. But now the night over the river outside of the windows seemed heavier than before and the world was still holding its breath. Bess looked at the moist backs of her hands, went to her dressing table, poured some eau de cologne into her palm and rubbed her forehead with it. She was completely spent and empty. What next? she thought, avoiding her own face in the mirror. She had never liked to look at this face of hers, although at times she had studied its shortcomings with painful absorption. It was a plain face, completely lacking in prettiness and yet not ugly enough to be interesting—or so Bess Poker thought. To her, who suffered from an almost aching weakness for

beautiful people and things, her face with its heavy and blunt features was nothing but a bad joke, and at this moment she not only disliked but feared to look at herself and encounter all the new bitterness and hatred which a few minutes ago had exploded in that shot. Mechanically she began to brush her hair back from her temples and up from the damp nape of her neck. I'll have to put on a dress, she told herself; she had been in her green lounging pajamas ready to go to bed when Marylynn had begun talking. Methodically she went through the closet picking out a thin gray Shantung dress, fresh white gloves, and a little sports hat. The distance between one step and the next seemed immeasurably long and exhausting, and beyond the next step there was a total nothingness. A raincoat? she thought, and that made her grin at herself. People in prison had not much use for raincoats. The door to Marylynn's bedroom stood open, and Bess braced herself and walked through.

In that small, tightly locked compartment of her mind where she kept her own dreams, most of her feelings, and all of her private heartaches, Bess might have hoped for a miracle. Turn back the clock an hour, make undone what was done, find Marylynn on her bed as if nothing had happened. But life had taught Bess that miracles don't happen; even the miracle she herself had worked in creating Marylynn had been the fabrication of years of very patient, very hard work. And now she herself had broken into

shatters the thing she herself had created. She stopped inside the door and, stepping out of the numbness that had mercifully enveloped her during the last ten minutes, she realized with a sharp, biting clarity that for once Marylynn, over there on her bed, was not simply lying there—beautiful, indolent, and lazy as usual—but either dead or else dying at this very moment.

At various points of their tightly entangled lives Bess had proved that she was no coward; but now she lacked the courage to touch Marylynn, and she didn't dare step close enough to see whether any breath was left in that lovely still body. Her glance ricocheted back and began wandering around the shining luxuries of the room. Deep white carpets, mirrored walls, Marylynn's initial embroidered in Napoleonic dominance on every pillow and cover, embossed on every silver brush, and etched on the crystal bottles which held the perfume named after her. Her evening dress, carelessly flung over the back of a chair, was a shimmering, exquisitely simple creation the particular shade of aquamarine which Bess had launched into fashion under the name of Marylynn-Blue. On the floor stood one of Marylynn's sixty-four pairs of shoes, little golden shells with genuine aquamarine clasps: all of this shrewdly conceived and designed to impress Marylynn's image and personality on the hard-boiled cynics who made up most of the New York audiences.

This was one Marylynn; the other one, over there on the bed, was loosely wrapped in a fluffy, cheap, pinkish negligee of the sort to which her own gaudy taste was given, and her sloppy old mules buried their scuffed noses in the white carpet as if she had just kicked them off as usual; only that Marylynn's lovely tan—that trade-mark of her golden beauty—was tinged with a sickish gray; as if she were merely a thing that had been lying there for a week without being dusted off. What made it so much worse was that horrible old doll, Emily, carefully bedded on her own little doll's pillow next to Marylynn and staring at Bess with wide-open glass eyes suffering with a doll's eternal insomnia. As Bess's glance traveled from the real Marylynn to the costly and effective props which she herself had designed for Marylynn the Star, there was once more a second of that fleeting coolness and relief and almost satisfaction. "You wanted it, Mary," she said; the sound of her own voice startled her, and she closed her mouth tightly over that bitter new grin of hers.

In the room still hung the echo of their last talk, culminating in Marylynn's casual announcement that she had decided to give up her career and retire into an existence so drab and humdrum that it seemed absolutely unbearable to Bess. She still heard the unfamiliar metallic sound in Marylynn's voice: "No use arguing, Pokey; I've made up my mind and I know exactly what I'm doing. You've outlived your useful-

ness. Thanks for everything, but I'm through making the monkey for you and your crowds. I never had a life of my own. It's time I start one before it's too late."

Like a cracked record Bess's mind turned round and round and round, repeating and repeating and repeating their argument and never getting beyond Marylynn's last words: "I'm sorry, Pokey, but this is where I get off." Then the slamming of a door and everything turning white, everything empty; then something breaking inside of her, a blind desperation, a rushing as if through fire, a sightless groping, and then the shot. And immediately after the shot that cool sensation of clarity and relief that had not left her since. All right, Bess thought. That's where you get off. That's the end of it. I should be sorry, but I'm not.

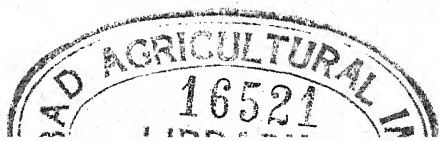
Automatically she had begun to straighten out the room as she had done every evening in all these years, but stopped in the midst of it when she remembered that the police wouldn't want anything to be touched. Abruptly she left Marylynn's room and went downstairs into the living room of the small, patrician house to which they had returned after Marylynn's separation from her husband.

After her radio show Dale Corbett had taken Marylynn to the Sans Souci while Bess had gone home all by herself. She had been upset by an unpleasant little disturbance in the smooth current of

the evening, more upset than she wanted anyone to notice. Going up in the elevator at Radio City to their show, they had encountered Luke Jordan, and Luke had ostentatiously pretended not to notice them. It was childish, and no gentleman would have behaved like that with two women of whom the beautiful one had been his wife until recently and the plain one the best friend of his life. Of course, Luke was childish; he also was something much better than a gentleman: he was a genius—within the limitations of Broadway's conception. Marylynn had been either too preoccupied or too indolent to notice the little slight. But then Marylynn had never been in love with Luke. . . .

And so Bess had gone home, with a small, sharp needle of an ache stuck into her, and had tried to chew down her irritation in solitude. She had taken out the letters Luke had written her during the years and the sketches of his earliest songs: a clean rich snowfall of letters with snatches of music scrawled between Luke's always amusing and sometimes burning sentences; notes marching like drunken little men across the space from one line to the next. Altogether she had managed to spend a rather consoling evening with these relics of the past. Looking back from where she stood now, that evening seemed to have taken place on a different planet altogether.

Automatically she emptied the ash tray, because cigarette smoke in the house was bad for Marylynn's



frail voice. She took the solitary highball glass into the pantry, rinsed it out, and then she stood, void of all thoughts, holding her hands under the tepid water of the faucet. Now it seemed to her as if, faintly and distantly, she could hear the sound of a siren, like the miaowing of a giant cat. And no rain yet. She returned to the living room and closed the piano. Hastily she picked up the letters, opened the big casual office desk that stood somewhat incongruously in the corner of the elaborately elegant room, and carefully locked them away in the drawer for her personal correspondence. It certainly was nobody's business that just before the shooting she had indulged in a sentimental hour with Luke Jordan's early compositions.

Now the nervous screeching of the siren rose, came very close and stopped. This would be the police. Bess went into the hall to open the front door.

Inspector James Fowler, a slim, quiet-spoken young man with eyeglasses, looked more like a college professor than a policeman; in fact, some college professors knew not half as much as he did about psychology, history, sociology, and several other things. Solicitously, patiently, and helpfully as any obstetrician he was trying to assist Bess Poker in giving birth to a confession of the detailed sort the police could use as a basis for prosecution. He had offered her his own cigarettes and politely lighted them for her; he had brewed her some coffee on his own little percola-

tor, and he had, with a slight smile at the formality, warned her that anything she might say could be used as evidence against her. And then he had tried to break her frozen muteness by treating her as if she were a patient and he the doctor to whom she had come for help. It was twenty minutes past three and he had not made any headway. The girl seemed as composed and calm as she had been from the first. Not a wrinkle in her dress, not a hair out of place, her white gloves still spotless, and not the slightest sign of a nervous crack-up. Remarkable person! thought Fowler, who began feeling exhausted.

"You are not too tired to go on, Miss Poker?"

"Thanks, no."

"You really should follow my advice and get yourself an attorney."

"Thanks, no. I'm used to taking care of myself. I don't need a lawyer."

"You're only making it hard for yourself."

"I told you that I shot Marylynn. I called the police in myself. What else do you want of me?"

"Look here, Miss Poker: before the law it isn't enough if you tell us that you shot Marylynn; before the law you are innocent until we, the police, have been able to prove that you did it. I know exactly how exhausted and miserable you must feel now. The best way of cutting this procedure short is by opening up and helping us to clarify the case."

Bess shrugged her shoulders at these intricacies of the law.

"Help you? How? What do you want to know?"

"The motive, for instance."

Bess shrugged her shoulders again; her heavy eyelids dropped for a second over her dry, hot, dark eyes. The motive? There had been a compelling, an irresistible force driving her when she fired that shot; but now it was all blotted out. Fowler gauged the small flicker of emotion on her frozen face.

"You had a fight with Marylynn?"

Bess gave him a small, politely regretful smile—as if he were a child for whom she felt sorry. "We never had a fight; what would we have to fight about?"

"Money, for instance. You managed Marylynn's business; there were large sums involved——"

"Yes," Bess said quietly, "but we never disagreed in money matters."

"I understand that you had a very remarkable contract with Marylynn; instead of the usual ten per cent you took half of her earnings."

"I didn't take it; she gave it to me. You see—we were friends, first of all."

Fowler tried once more some of the reasons for which, according to statistics, most murders were committed. "Was it jealousy, then?"

"Jealousy of what?" Bess said, and for a second the inspector had the impression that she was making fun of him.

"Of the natural object: a man."

Now Bess smiled at him quite openly. "Did you ever see Marylynn on the stage?" she asked.

"Yes. In that hit—what was its title? *Why Not Tonight?*"

"Well," Bess said, satisfied, and folded her hands in her lap.

"Well—what?"

"One didn't fight with Marylynn about men," Bess said. It sounded final.

There was a moment's silence, and then Fowler tried another tack. "I understand that Marylynn was very fond of you."

"I'm sure she was."

"And you seemed devoted to her."

"Yes. Very devoted."

"And yet you shot her?"

"And yet I shot her."

"Why? Why? Why?"

Bess looked down at her hands in the white gloves. "It's no use, Inspector," she said; "you wouldn't understand it."

Lady, Inspector Fowler thought, you don't know how much we understand here. He filled her coffee cup again. "Try it anyway," he said gently.

"All right," Bess said, after a moment's pause. "It was suicide."

"Suicide?"

"Yes. Suicide. An act of self-destruction," Bess said

patiently. At this Fowler grew angry. "Now listen here," he said, "you confessed to the shooting. Don't try to pull any tricks on me now. It won't do you any good."

Bess smiled at him, almost bored. "I told you that you wouldn't understand it, Inspector," she said politely. "But it was suicide, all the same. I had come to a dead end. I wanted to kill myself. But, you see, I had no life of my own. My life was—Marylynn. And so I shot her. . . ."

Fowler's tension slackened, and he gave a deep sigh. This wasn't the sort of answer that would sit well in a police report. "Okay, Miss Poker," he said resignedly, "let's start at the beginning. When did you meet Marylynn first?"

Three-twenty A.M. at the station house. No rain yet. The heat unbearable. A patient, tired police inspector. A painfully composed, tired culprit, trying to remember what she had done and why she had done it. Quiet. Glare of light on her strong, drawn face. Bubbling of the percolator in the corner, faint scratch of pencil on pad as the stenographer jotted down his shorthand notes. Somewhere on Fifty-first Street the abrupt screeching of brakes; the slamming of a door, the incessant, muffled sound of a radio somewhere in the building; the whistled snatch of a hit song as someone passed by in the corridor. One of Luke Jordan's early songs that had survived the seasons and become a perennial. . . .

"I met Marylynn almost ten years ago," said Bess Poker. "At that time she stayed at my mother's boardinghouse in Brooklyn and couldn't pay her rent. . . ."

The old house was always full of moans and creaks and sighs; in the parlor Mother's rocking chair squeaking a duet with that of Mr. Isensteen, her oldest boarder. The steps of the wooden stairs complaining about every passing guest. The senile clunking of the tired heating system, the faint rustle of mortar behind the wainscoting of the upper landing, the bronchitic cough of Mrs. Calender in her musty room, the whole depressing symphony of upright, genteel decay. It all waited for Bess and jumped up at her the moment she opened the front door, the way her little dog had waited and jumped in those happier days when her father was still alive. She was dripping wet, for you had to walk eight blocks from the subway station—one of the reasons for the low rents their boarders paid—and a stiff November wind drove slanting sheets of rain down the street. Stopping on the door mat, Bess shook out her umbrella and took off her rubbers, so as not to carry all the water into the demonstratively clean hall. The perpetual acrid smell of floor wax, polish, and soap was another characteristic of the house. "Darling—is that you? Why don't you close the door? It's drafty," her

mother's gentle voice called from the parlor. Bess closed the door, hung up her coat, dried her wet cheeks with her handkerchief, and went in. "Good evening, Mr. Isensteen," she said first, with the politeness due their star boarder. "Hello, Mother. And how's my girl tonight?"

"Oh, I'm all right. Really I am," her mother said, waiting to be prompted into a complaint. Bess knew her cue. "This weather can't be good for you—how're your pains?" she asked, patting the pillow behind her mother's back.

"I really don't like talking about it; it really is almost nothing. Just that it has gone into my left shoulder now," Mrs. Poker said and gave her the brave, tired smile. "It" was an elusive pain, omnipresent, forever used by Mrs. Poker as a lever, a tool, a shield, a sort of universal weapon against the daily demands of life. Mrs. Poker had a very definite picture of herself; the helpless, frail, but gallant woman, the sweet, silently suffering martyr; a portrait in dusty rose within a frame of faded blue and silver. "I'm sorry you're not feeling well," Bess said. As she put a perfunctory kiss upon her mother's thin graying hair she felt her lips tighten as though she had bitten into a lemon. Her own hair was thick and obstinate—the sort of stuff you fill mattresses with, she often thought to herself. Since childhood this hair had been a source of constant sorrow for her mother. "Your hair, darling," Mrs. Poker would say mechanically, "—you

must do something about it. Just go and have a look at yourself in the mirror."

Bess threw a glance into the mirror over the cold fireplace. She didn't think that she looked so awful—but maybe she was just used to herself. If I were a horse they'd call me beautiful, she thought defiantly. There was nothing wrong with her eyes, at least; lots of bones, though, high cheekbones, too much of a nose, too much of a mouth, an awful lot of strong, big teeth that must have somehow got out of control at the time there was not enough money for braces. A bit out of proportion the whole thing, too long, too strong, too coarse, too thin—she just happened to be the sort of girl after whom no man would turn his head and no boy would whistle. By and by Bess was trying to acquire a humorous sort of indifference toward her irreparable lack of that white-and-pink porcelain prettiness which her mother constantly held before her as the most desirable possession of any female. By and by she had built her defensive little shell, a process that wasn't quite painless. Inspirational articles in women's magazines called it "developing one's personality." After all, Bess thought in optimistic moments, we plain-looking people are in the majority. We fill the streets, the subways, the offices, and to one pretty girl there are ten of my own sort. . . .

"Darling, would you go and see if Connie is asleep in her kitchen?" Mrs. Poker said sweetly. "It would be

nice if, for once, we could have our supper on time."

"Yes, Mother," said Bess and took herself away from the mirror. As she went out she heard her mother ask Mr. Isensteen: "Don't you think Bess looks more and more like her father did, the poor darling? Now, in my family . . ." and she quickly closed the door over the rest of it.

Connie was by no means asleep but busily fluting the crust-edge of an apple pie. It was warm and good in the large old kitchen, and there was a smell of cinnamon and lemon peel that made Bess for a second feel like a child.

"Lord, but I'm tired and wet, Connie," she said, letting herself fall onto the kitchen chair. "Will you have supper ready on time?"

"Sure, you know I will; your mama's just having one of them days," Connie said good-naturedly. "Somethin' wrong with you, honey?" she went on after one quick glance at Bess. "You look all done in. Want me to bring you a tray up to your room?"

"Thanks, no. Mother wouldn't like that. It's just—there was just some trouble at the office."

"Want to tell Connie about it?"

"Not now. I've got to write some letters, damn it all!"

"Always swearin', ain't you, honey?" Connie said, patting Bess's cheek with her dark, soft, flour-dusted hand. Reluctantly Bess left the warm little haven, taking the little caress with her into her room.

It was not much of a room; two walls slanted down, there was a small dormer window and a few ramshackle pieces of furniture. The gas heater she lit to drive out the murky, damp chillness soon filled the few yards with its smell. The better bedrooms and the better furniture were used for the boarders; at times Bess wished she too were a boarder in this house that she called home. Gloom was squatting in every nook and corner, but Bess hated to feel sorry for herself; resolutely she pushed the dark mood away. Well, let's do something, she told herself; to Do Something was her never-failing medicine. She sat down and began to compose a letter. It had to be aggressive, yet not too aggressive, different, but not so different as to frighten them, with just a dash of originality which would make the powers-that-be read it to the end. She opened the typewriter, pushed it under the little ten-cent-store lamp on her night table, and went into deep concentration.

"Brief Memo (Reading Time: 1 min. 27 sec.)," she wrote down. Yes, that was a good start.

"FROM: Elizabeth Poker, age 20, female, white.

"TO: Her Future Boss.

"PURPOSE: Finding a New Job.

"LIST OF QUALIFICATIONS:

"CHARACTER: Reliable, plenty of initiative, conscientious, even-tempered.

"PERSONALITY: Pleasant, unobtrusive if desired, aggressive if necessary.

"APPEARANCE: (Here Bess hesitated, and then went on resolutely):

"APPEARANCE: Just the sort of girl your wife would hire for you.

"BACKGROUND: Through Woodrow Wilson High School with flying colors; two years at Hunter College. Majored in nothing, but learned a lot. Was forced to quit college for private and financial reasons. Was graduated subsequently from the Crittenden Institute & Business College after winning first prize in the combined speed-typing-and-steno Contest, sponsored by Touchlite Typewriter Company.

"EXPERIENCE: Plenty. Accomplished clerk-typist and stenographer, filing and confidential secretarial work. Employed at the New York office of the advertising agency of Grayson, Caldwell & Grayson until recently——"

Bess sighed a little as she came to the crucial point, and then she let herself go in a furious burst of clatter:

"See enclosed letter of recommendation by Mr. H. G. Grayson, Jr. (You don't need to read it, you know what's in it anyway.) Had to give up the job through circumstances beyond control, caused by the hiring of an efficiency expert and the subsequent large-scale reorganization and reduction of the office staff of Grayson, Caldwell & Grayson——"

Abruptly she stopped, pulled out the sheet, tore up the letter, threw it away, and then she gave the little lamp a rude push. "Aw you!" she said furiously. When I get rich I'll splash hundred-watt bulbs all over the place, she often thought; to her the dim little light that made reading and studying so hard had become a symbol of all their penny pinching which she so hated. She fastened her eyes on the slanting wall in an effort to concentrate and find some amusing finish to her letter. But there was nothing amusing about her present situation. The depression which was eating up the entire country had at last caught up with her, too, and was swallowing her down its dark, insatiable gullet. After a few minutes she put her arms on the table and buried her face in them. She would have liked to cry, but she did not know how to do it.

That was how Luke Jordan found her. She had not heard the whistled little melody that accompanied every step of his, and he opened the door without knocking. Bess stared at him with angry, dry, hot eyes. "What's the idea, rumbling into my room like this?" she said.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," he sang out. "Didn't know Your Majesty was in. I'm to look after your gas heater; Connie says it leaks."

"Let it leak. Get out now. Leave me alone," Bess said. Luke paid no attention to her but knelt down in front of the heater, and his large hands began deftly to work with hammer and wrench. With Luke

in the room it became at once smaller, warmer, and brighter. Bess was familiar with this effect. It had something to do with his being so tall, so blazingly redheaded, and so perpetually heated by his own enthusiasm. A cigarette stuck to one corner of his wide mouth even while he kept whistling. His eyes, inheritance of his Polish mother, were large, brown, soft, sad. He did not seem to pay any attention to Bess, and he did not look at her as he asked: "What's the matter with you, Pokerface?"

This was a very disrespectful way of addressing her, considering that Luke was only tolerated as an odd-job man in her mother's home; he cleaned the windows and carpets, polished the floor and the brass, handled the vacuum cleaner and took care of the furnace. His wages consisted of a cubicle in the basement to sleep in. Luke's precarious livelihood was a patchwork of similar odd jobs. Not only did he earn his quarters as the handy man of the Poker ménage, but some of his meals by playing the piano for the singing lessons a certain Madame Kuprin gave to a few ambitious though untalented young creatures. Fortunately Madame Kuprin was a better cook than she was a teacher and, since starting to work for her, Luke Jordan had begun to put a thin layer of flesh over his heavy bones. Lastly, he was occasionally called upon to substitute for another boy at the Gay Nineties, a small restaurant where he had to put a mustache on his face, a bowler hat on his head,

and play old hit songs. Luke had not a grain of respect for anything or anybody. He was uniquely likable and eminently gifted, a tough, bright, indestructible plant, such as grows only from the hard pavements of the New York slums.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Didn't Sid tell you?" Sid was an office boy at Grayson, Caldwell & Grayson's and their mutual friend.

"Haven't seen Sid today."

"I got fired—just like the rest of them. Eighteen girls in our department alone."

"Well, what do you care, kid? You'll get a better job."

"Sure, what do I care? Prosperity is just around the corner. I looked at the want ads. There was one job. Experienced trained nurse with a perfect knowledge of Turkish!"

He stood behind her, and she felt his large hands coming to her, first their approaching warmth and then their lively, consoling touch as he gripped her shoulders. Luke's hands looked like two outsized blocks of concrete, but they were a musician's hands—amazingly soft and sensitive and vibrant. Now, Bess felt with surprise, she would have been able to cry a little; but now she didn't want to. Luke bent down to her, and for a dizzy moment Bess expected something world-shaking to happen. If he tries to kiss me I'll have to slap his face, she thought in a

melting panic that made her weak in the knees. But Luke did nothing of the sort. He straightened up again and asked casually: "And whom did they make Grayson Jr.'s private secretary?"

"Whom else but that cutie-pie, our own Sweet Clementine! Why, she can't spell 'George Washington' without a mistake."

"Yeah? But she has her points," Luke said knowingly, and Bess remembered that he had once called sex the most unimportant necessity in life. She herself had so far had no opportunity to form a definite opinion on the subject. Up to now sex was a game which everybody seemed to play while she was left out. Like bridge, or playing the numbers. Her own innermost, secret, and innocent conception of sex had something to do with a huge, upright stuffed bear standing in an entrance hall and holding a tray for visiting cards, an apparition that had deeply shocked, frightened, and impressed her when she had encountered it as a little girl. Sex was large, hairy, and beastly; it was also extremely fascinating. Like most young people, she and Luke had earnestly discussed sex, along with Picasso, social security, Karl Marx, and what made Gershwin tick. Luke's hands were still on her shoulders as he said: "Of course, you didn't tell your mother about it."

"Of course not. She would only work up a heart attack and there would be another doctor's bill to pay. After all, I've got to balance the budget."

"You and the President of the United States." Luke gave her a last squeeze, took his hands away from her, and came around the table. "Someday when we'll be rich you'll laugh about Mr. Grayson, Jr.; so why not laugh right away?" he said cheerfully.

"Yeah? And how will we get rich?"

He was whistling again, the cold cigarette stub sticking to the other end of his grin; but behind that grin he turned serious for a moment as he answered: "We? The hard way, Pokerface."

It was beautiful, Bess thought, how naturally he said "we." He seemed to take it for granted that the two of them were a unit and belonged together, no questions asked and no promises given. Happily she let herself drift along in the warm current as she asked:

"What will we do when we're rich, Luke?"

But Luke had enough of the fairy-tale mood. He interrupted his whistling to say: "Why, I'll buy you the Hope Diamond, put it on a platinum ring and hang it on your nose"—and then he went on whistling.

Bess watched him with drowsy contentment as he returned to his work on the gas heater. By and by the little whistled melody took on a clearer shape and sharper contours, as if he were chiseling it from the air with the knocks of his hammer. Then the hammer, too, came to life and began to syncopate against the beating of the wrench on the metal grilles

of the heater. Now the rhythm began to flow, to vibrate, to drum, to take possession of all of Luke. His head, shoulders, his hands, bony knees, large feet—everything began to take part in the song that was taking shape. Bess had watched this phenomenon before and watched it again with always the same happy thrill. Suddenly he banged the hammer with a crash against the floor and asked: "Well, how do you like it?"

"Not bad. Gershwin?" Bess said, just for the fun of getting a rise out of him. He reacted promptly. "Aw, Gershwin! Much better. Luke Jordan's newest hit song: 'Coming In out of the Rain.' Music by Luke Jordan. Lyrics by Luke Jordan. Orchestra—Luke Jordan in person." With great gusto he took up his hammer and wrench again. "How do like it?"

"I don't know," Bess said; she had listened with great concentration, trying hard to catch it at once. "The second four bars—there's something not quite right—they fall a bit flat, don't they? You can do better, you know."

"What do you mean, flat? Come on, sing it for me."

"Where it goes *tatah-tahtah-tumtah*—it should better go *tiddle-tiddle doh, boobooob tiddle-dohoo*——"

"Stop it! Stop croaking at me—I can't stand it!" Luke shouted.

"You know I have no voice!" Bess shouted back at

him. "Why don't you take your song to one of Madame Kuprin's Singing Cows?"

He looked wildly around the room for some means of self-expression. "Gosh Almighty, what a dump this is! No piano in the house, and for a muse a tone-deaf halfwit who can't sing as loud as a rain worm. There—how's this for your *tiddle-tiddle-boo*? . . ."

He leaped back into his one-man production, whistling, humming, grunting—for he himself had just as rudimentary a voice as Bess. Sweating, drumming, stomping the floor with his large feet and pounding the hammer against the heater while his left hand played an obstinate bass on the wall, he brought forth his new song—not without including Bess's improvements. They were deep in the act of creation when the house began to protest from all sides. Mrs. Calender was knocking against the door which separated her room from that of Bess and plaintively calling for quiet. In the parlor was some commotion, and then old Mr. Isensteen came panting up the stairs to tell Bess to stop that racket, for mercy's sake, her poor mother was having a terrible headache; while Mrs. Poker herself was suffering downstairs in a silence much louder than all the noise they had made.

"Well, there you are, Luke," Bess said when the door had closed again behind Mr. Isensteen's reproachful back. "That's all the fun for tonight."

Luke picked up hammer and wrench and crept to

the door with a parodistic hangdog air. There he stopped and came back once more.

"Look here, Pokerface," he said quietly, "would it make you feel better if I'd take you to a movie after dinner?"

"It certainly would. Great mercy, Luke, what would I do without you?" she said gratefully. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his exhausted corduroy pants and brought them back with a few coins. "In that case, Miss Poker," he declared solemnly, "I would have to instigate a financial transaction of considerable expansion. That is, if you would lend me twenty-three cents I could invite you to the neighborhood theater and maybe even treat you to a milk shake afterwards."

Bess began to laugh. "Okay, you gigolo," she said, feeling suddenly unreasonably warm and good and buoyant. "I'll take you. I'll treat *you*. But get out now and don't make any noise, or Mother'll cry for her smelling salts."

She opened the door for him and watched him march down the stairs, whistling triumphantly. She never forgot that moment, because it was the last time that she felt the way she did just then. So unquestioning, so safely nestled up in the security that Luke belonged to her and she to him. That there was always Luke, whatever else might be wrong with her life.

Well, in a way Luke had always been there,

through all these years, and she had got all the things she wanted, hadn't she? Well—almost all of them. And where was Luke now?

For a moment Bess came out of her memories and found herself back at the police station, Inspector Fowler's inquisitive glance expectantly resting on her face and the stenographer's fingers poised over his pad to take down her statement.

"I even remember the date," she whispered. "November 12th, 1936." And then she returned to that moment when Luke had gone down the stairs and that girl, Marylynn, had come up.

They met in the middle of the creaking stairway, and Luke pressed himself flat against the banister to let the girl pass; he did it with an expression of ironical deference, and the girl pushed past him, looking straight ahead and swinging her left hip to the side just the least bit. But the stairway was narrow and her body touched his—and then he continued downward while the girl went on up.

She wore a raincoat, cheap but shiny, and with a tear at the left pocket; unbuttoning the coat, she was releasing a warm, sweet gust of perfume. As she impatiently shook back the hood, her hair came tumbling out in fat ringlets with a life all of its own. It had the rare color of freshly cut wood, and raindrops were scattered all over it. Her long, oblique eyes were sulking under rich, badly mascaraed eyelashes, and she had a juicy, pouting lower lip. With a famil-

iar little stab of envy Bess wondered how anyone could be so attractive after padding for eight blocks through a ghastly, rainy, stormy November evening. And a second later she noticed that Luke had stopped whistling.

He stood at the foot of the stairs now, had taken the cigarette from his mouth and was staring after the girl. On his face was an expression which Bess had never seen there before: a queer mixture of hunger, rapture, and contempt; amusement, too, and even vulgarity. No man had ever looked at her with that expression—least of all Luke Jordan. A sharp pain which she didn't quite understand at the moment cut into her like a knife, and then it was all over. Bess couldn't help herself. She went down, touched his elbow, and said under her breath, "A dollar for your thought, Luke."

The question seemed to startle him, but his eyes were still on the back of that girl as he answered: "Aw—I just had a notion——"

You certainly had, Bess thought bitterly. The lovely long legs up there took the last steps, the lovely curved hips made another swinging movement as the girl was reaching the upper landing. It was unbelievable how anyone dressed in a raincoat could look so very nude.

"That girl has a future," said Luke.

"You think she has talent?" said Bess.

"That I wouldn't know; but I like the shape of

her voice," said Luke—and now his grin was openly insolent while his eyes kept following the girl until she disappeared in the door of her room. Only then did he put the cold cigarette into his mouth again, took a deep breath and began to whistle.

In the parlor Mother's rocking chair seemed to have held its breath, too, but now it squeaked again in agitation. "Luke? How often will I have to beg you not to whistle all the time?" Mrs. Poker called accusingly. "Would you mind going down and looking after the furnace? With whom are you talking? Is that you, Bess? Could you come here, darling, and not keep Luke from his work?"

Luke dissolved toward the dim regions of the basement, and Bess went obediently in. Clear and sharp as never before she felt that once more she was left out of the game, not invited to the dance, forever sitting on the side lines. She found her mother sniffing with gentle disapproval. "Who was it that just came home, Bess? That Lynn girl? The whole house smells of her the moment she only enters the hall. If she'd pay her rent instead of spending her money on those awful perfumes—listen, Bess, you'll have to talk to her right now. She promised to pay tonight, and if she doesn't I'll really make her move out tomorrow. I'm a patient woman, but what's too much is too much and——"

Bess remonstrated but found herself irresistibly forced into accepting a task she disliked from the bot-

tom of her heart. All right, that's all that's needed to make this a perfect evening, she thought grimly as she climbed up the protesting stairway and knocked at Miss Lynn's door. Somehow she had during the last few minutes completely dropped the idea of going to a movie with Luke tonight—or ever again. All cheerfulness gone out, all lights turned off. It was one of those silent little emotional catastrophes, a landslide inside, eruption of some invisible volcano, earthquake at the bottom of the sea, which can change the entire direction of a life.

Miss Lynn was lying on her bed; she had dropped her wet raincoat to the floor and kicked off her small shoes with the high, run-down heels; she had pulled off one of her wet stockings and kept the other on, as if she had run out of energy in the midst of undressing. Her eyes were still sulking and she was frantically chewing gum.

"Good evening, Miss Lynn," said Bess. "I'm Miss Poker. I don't think we've met before."

"Oh, sure, I know you. Sit down, won't you? I know what you want. You're coming for the rent," the girl said. "Well, I haven't got it, see?"

Bess swept some lingerie from a chair and sat down. The blunt approach had taken all the wind out of her sails. "My mother only wanted me to ask you how you made out today," she said.

"How? Lousy," the girl answered. Obviously she was completely absorbed in her own troubles and

wanted to talk about them. She sat up and pushed her hair back. "Have you ever tried to get a job in the chorus of a new show?" she asked. Her glance marched up and down Bess's figure, she gave a little snort and added: "No—you wouldn't. It's not your line of work, is it? Well, you can be glad about that. It's murder, that's what it is."

Bess felt unaccountably sorry for the girl. "But you're so pretty—and you can sing," she said, almost timid.

"Me and another five hundred perfectly swell kids; every one of them a perfect number twelve. Sing, dance, tap, high-kick, split, show your legs, pull down your blouse, let's see your teeth, what about your appendix, no scars? What's your weight, sorry, you ain't the type. Good night. *Good night!*" she repeated bitterly; she took the gum from her mouth and pasted it to the underside of the night stand.

"I know how you feel; I was kicked out on my ear myself today," Bess said.

"You? Imagine that! And you went to college, didn't you? Your mother told me."

Bess took her eyes off the girl and let them travel around the room; Mary Lynn had imparted some of her personality to it. An assortment of her own photos adorned the walls, mingled with magazine covers that had attracted her. These, surprisingly, were all of the homey type: mothers with babies, fathers on a fishing trip with their little boys, little lambs scampering

in pastures, small dream cottages behind white picket fences. Little frills and bows were tacked to the heavy mahogany furniture that had come down from the substantial home of Bess's grandparents, and various unfortunate attempts had been made to cozy up the room with pillows and knickknacks of all sorts. Bess, who was born with good taste, shuddered slightly, especially when she discovered that a doll with a somewhat chipped porcelain head was sharing Miss Lynn's bed.

"That's Emily," the girl said. "Isn't she cute? When I left home I took her along for company. I'm glad I did. New York is such a lonely place. My uncle gave her to me when I was nine—such a nice man. Now tell me: How much do I owe your mother?"

"Thirty-six fifty," Bess said, embarrassed, handing Mary Lynn the account. The girl studied it with a puppy's worried deep frown; she seemed disarmingly young and stupid. She unwrapped another stick of gum and shoved it into her pouting mouth.

"Thirty-six bucks—is that all? You know what I'd do if I'd got thirty-six bucks? I'd sneak out of here and take the next bus home; honest, that's what I'd do." She scanned the bill once more and added: "New York ain't my town. I should've stayed home in the first place. Jack told me so—but would I listen? Not me, oh no!"

Bess should have left the room to report to her mother the unsuccessful outcome of her mission; but

she remained where she was, compelled by a queer curiosity to listen to Miss Lynn's soliloquy. It was good for her own self-respect to discover that gorgeous blondes, too, had their difficulties. "Is Jack the boy friend?" she asked, descending to Miss Lynn's level of conversation.

"Not exactly. We went to high school together, you know. For a while we went steady, and then I got other ideas. He wanted me to marry him and I couldn't make up my mind and he got mad at me. He's a garage mechanic now, makes good money, though. I might still marry him, at that. That is, if I ever get back home."

"You love him?"

"Do I? How do I know? How do kids my age know if they're in love or not? I like to dance with Jack and to tease him, if that's what you mean. But that's because I've always known him. Naturally, I don't know if I love him before I've met other men, isn't that true? There are millions of them—why should I pin myself down to one boy, just because we went to school together? Love—you want my honest opinion, Miss Poker? I don't believe there is such a thing as love, do you? I think people just made it up to keep the movies and the radio and the magazines going. But Jack is nice," she added with a lazy and indulgent smile. "I like Jack; he's a nice boy."

"Where do you come from?" Bess asked, trying to place Mary's lazy, chanting dialect.

"Blythe, California. I'm far from home, ain't I? Not much of a place, though, just a small dump in the desert. But gosh, do I wish I was there right now!"

"Why did you leave home?" Bess asked; she was not really curious, but the girl needed so much to talk about herself, and it was very soothing and relaxing to listen to her primitive biography. Downstairs the dinner began to announce itself with rumbling voices and the clanking of plates as Connie set the table. Bess was not eager to face Mrs. Poker and her boarders tonight.

"Well, to tell you the truth, there was a little scandal, and when Mrs. Burgell offered me the money to go to New York and take singing lessons I grabbed it gladly. I always wanted to go on the stage. Naturally, all she wanted was to get me out of Blythe and away from that husband of hers, but to me it was *the* great chance, wasn't it?"

"I see," said Bess, vaguely groping for a thread in the muddled story.

"No, you don't. I wouldn't have nothing to do with a man twice my age. He must be thirty-six if he's a day, and they have two kids, the cutest little tykes you could think of. I thought he was just joking when he said he'd ask for a divorce, wouldn't you? Well, maybe you're not as dumb as I am in these things. When you're working in a café you always have some regular customers who drop in and have their fun

with you. How was I to know that Mr. Burgell would turn around and tell Mrs. Burgell he wanted a divorce because he had fallen so hard for me? You should have heard the noise it made in Blythe. Mr. Burgell is about the richest man there, you know. Alfalfa. But Mrs. Burgell can have him and keep him, for all I care."

"You didn't like him?" Bess gave a tentative cue.

"I wouldn't say that. He took me out in his car and gave me a good time, once we went all the way to Palm Springs and he showed me some of the movie stars in the swimming pool of the hotel. He said I had a nicer figure than any of them. But there was never anything between Mr. Burgell and me, honest there wasn't. He's a nice man, though; in a way I liked him; he's very nice," she concluded, giving Mr. Burgell's memory the same lazy, indulgent, and indiscriminate smile she had bestowed on Jack.

"His wife sounds nicer than he does, though," said Bess; she pictured Mrs. Burgell somewhat on her own lines and took her side instinctively. A plain woman, getting hurt in the uneven tussle between her and Mary Lynn's blooming, shiny, glistening youth; jealous, but too intelligent to show it. Taking the initiative and getting her rival out of the way in a quiet and benevolent manner. That's how I would have handled it if I had been in her place, Bess thought with appreciation.

"Sure, she's nice; ugly, but nice, if you know what

I mean. I'd be nice too if I had her money and her position and all that. Children, you know, and a home."

"I think you're nice just as you are, Miss Lynn," Bess said spontaneously, touched by the girl's inarticulate longing for security.

"You do? Well, thank you. Thank you so much . . . and me owing you all that money! Listen, why don't you call me Mary? Want some gum? No? Too bad I'm all out of cigarettes; but they're bad for my voice anyhow," the girl said in a gush of gratitude. There was something childish in her reaching out for some friendliness. Poor stupid little thing, Bess thought. She must have taken a few hard knocks, for all her eighteen years. But, Lord, if I had her looks——"

"And your parents? Can't you write to them? I'm sure they'd like you to come home," she suggested.

"Nope. No can do. My parents died in a car accident when I was five, both of them. And my aunt is mad at me—she runs that café, you know, and this thing with Mr. Burgell almost ruined her business. Listen, Miss Poker, will you talk to your mother and ask her not to kick me out? Honest, I wouldn't know where to go. Something must turn up soon, and I'll pay my rent. Seems the Shuberts are beginning to cast their new show next week end. Mr. Koretz promised me a job—he's such a nice man."

Bess looked at the girl without listening to her;

with an almost painful concentration she dug her glance into that indolent, stupid, lost, lonely bundle of loveliness that fate had dropped onto the old bed of the cheapest room in her mother's house.

She did not know that this was the turning point in the lives of both of them. She only followed every line of that face and body and said: "Don't worry, you'll get a job. Jesus, if I had your looks, the world would be my oyster."

"Yeah? Much good my looks do me," Mary said; "my looks—you can have them and welcome to it. Just makes men fresh and women nasty and gets me in one mess after another." She discovered the soaking-wet stocking on her left leg, angrily kicked that long smooth leg into the air and pulled the stocking off with one reckless snap. "If you had my looks, what would you do with them? That's what I want to know—what would *you* do?"

What wouldn't I do! Bess thought. Oh, everything. I wouldn't be a stenographer without a job; I wouldn't wait for some Sir Galahad to save me by saying "Take a letter, Miss Poker." I wouldn't live like a subway train—always underground, always running on the same tracks, every day, every day. If I had your looks, I would be in on the game and I'd make money and buy what I want and do what I want. I'd be the best-dressed woman in the U.S.A. and I'd have success and excitement and romance, something new every day—and I would travel and

meet interesting people and all the men would be crazy about me, and I'd pick the best one and live happily ever after.

Mary Lynn's last question was still hanging in the air when Bess had reached the point where her tower of dreams was touching the clouds. Then it toppled over with a soundless crash and she woke up from her little fling at sleepwalking and looked around the room. And it was just like Bess to end it all by saying resolutely:

"If I had your looks, Mary, I'd begin by taking these shoes to the repair shop at the corner and have the heels straightened out. . . ."

It was forty-three minutes past three, and Inspector Fowler looked gray with fatigue. He broke a long silence and gave Bess his tired, tolerant smile of a father confessor. "All right, Miss Poker," he said, "you met Marylynn on November 12th, 1936, when she was a boarder in your mother's house. What happened then?"

"Then? We became friends. I thought I could make something of her."

"In other words, you calculated that there was a girl with a future and you hung on to her?"

"Yes," said Bess. For a split second there was a glint of protest in her eyes and then complete indifference again. "Yes, I suppose that expresses it well enough."

"All right," said the inspector. "Now let's go on from there. You took Marylynn's affairs in your hands—and then?"

"Then?"

The funny room which Madame Kuprin called her Studio: long and narrow as a towel and forever impregnated with the smell of perspiration, the smell of generations of ambitious young females sweating their way through it. Not only did Madame Kuprin give her lessons there, but she rented the studio out by the hour—to ballet teachers, dramatic teachers, teachers of stage deportment, tango specialists, teachers of modern calisthenics, and even to a woman yogi and her disciples. At one wall a mirror suffering from cataract, two little shaving mirrors over the ballet bars on the other. An asthmatic upright piano, a victrola stand, but no victrola, a Chinese gong; the yellowed photos of dancers and singers and actors, all past and dead and gone. An oil portrait of Madame Kuprin as Carmen, Madame's scrapbooks reporting about her triumphs at the Belgrade Opera but unreadable because printed in Illyric letters—and Madame Kuprin herself, two hundred fifty pounds of fanaticism on the subject of *bel canto*.

"Just sit down and listen, Pokerface," said Luke Jordan, "we're having a big surprise for you."

Luke's saying "we" had assumed a different meaning in those weeks. Sometimes it took in the three of them: Luke himself, Mary Lynn, and—in that order

—Bess. Sometimes it meant only him and Mary; never again after that evening had it meant him and Bess alone. He was overflowing with new ideas during that time, and he still broke into Bess's room to bang and whistle them for her, drum the accompaniment on her table, get furious at her criticisms and yet accept them under wild cries of protest. But somehow there was always Mary Lynn mixed up in his new inspirations; he came to Bess to complain about Mary, to call Mary an idiot, a lazy cow, a lost cause, and a duck-billed platypus; and then he disappeared again, with Mary obediently tagging after him.

For now Luke Jordan had taken it upon himself to give Mary singing lessons. He was convinced that several experimental weeks in which she had been subjected to Madame Kuprin's tutoring had put her even more on the wrong track than she had been before. Mary had a small, trebling, childlike soprano, but a deep, throaty, husky laugh. Doing the unbelievable with the material given, Madame Kuprin had managed to teach Mary two pieces: The "Bell Song" from *Lakmé* and, for an encore, "Estrellita." These two pieces Mary had dragged through various auditions which led to nothing flat. All the promises of all the Nice Men she met here and there didn't get her anywhere; she still owed her rent, and Bess, who in the meantime had found a temporary job at Gimbel's Christmas sales, began even then to finance her. She did it for Luke's sake. Luke pinned great hopes

on the girl, for all his cursing and swearing. He claimed to know exactly what she needed, and he was sure that he could teach it to her. He went so far as to rent Madame's studio and upright piano to the tune of fifty cents an hour to give Mary private lessons. The fifty cents he frequently borrowed from Bess, who sat in her room, worn out from her day at Toyland, rubbing her aching feet with Walkeeze and chewing her own bitterness.

So now they had a surprise for her.

The surprise consisted of three songs by Luke Jordan, all tailored to Mary's newly-developed deep, sensual mezzo-soprano. "All she's got is a range of four notes," Luke explained; "but they're the sort of notes that go down your spine and directly into your glands. It's a voice with hormones." Bess, who had never heard any of Luke's music other than whistled and drummed to her, was more impressed than she wanted to show him. "But they are real songs, Luke," she said. "They are so—I don't know—so *complete*." She sounded like a mother looking at her newborn baby and marveling that it had all its fingers and toes.

"Sure, they are complete. But what do you think of Mary?" Luke asked avidly.

"Well——" Bess said tentatively.

"I know exactly what you mean," said Luke. "But just give us a little time. We'll make the grade yet." Mary stood by, saying nothing, just smiling her lazy, lovely, indolent smile.

"Your mascara is coming off again, Mary," Bess said and left it at that.

Bess could never remember how and when that plan, that thought, that crazy idea began to take possession of her; but by and by it went to sleep with her and got up with her on those dark winter mornings when she had to hurry to the subway. It shrilled at her with the voice of the alarm clock, it hung with her on the straps of the crowded subway, it went with her to the ladies' room for a stolen cigarette, and it sat in her lap while she was listening to her mother's complaints.

Probably Luke himself had planted that crazy idea into her mind the day he cried out wildly: "Jesus Christ, if I could only make one girl out of the two of you! If you'd have Mary's figure and her sort of a voice—or if she'd have your brains and personality—then we would really go places." Pulling his hair and stomping his feet, he implored Heaven and Hell for the impossible while Bess watched him in silence.

"Well, you can't have everything," she said at last, soberly. "You'll have to make your choice." She spoke to herself more than to him. But Luke suddenly grew very quiet; he turned his face to the small window of her room and took the ever-present cigarette out of his mouth. Bess, to whom every little movement of his was so deeply dear and familiar, knew that he parted with his cigarette only at moments of the greatest importance. For a little while he stood

there, silent, holding his breath; as he turned back to her his face was filled with a translucent seriousness and his eyes looked sadder than ever. He put his square, large hands gently down on her shoulders, as he had done so often in former days, and for a moment Bess stood enveloped safely in the warmth that vibrated from his body. He seemed to search for some communion, some understanding. "You know that I've made my choice, Pokerface," he said at last. Yes, I know, Bess thought, bitterly, and you don't have to rub it in. The strange half minute dissolved into nothing, and Luke put back his cigarette and began to whistle.

That night she woke up and suddenly everything seemed quite clear and simple to her. "And why not?" she whispered into the dark. "Why not?"

That was the beginning of it all. That was when she began to project her own dreams into the other girl. That was when she decided to become the invisible other half of Mary Lynn. That was when she took possession of Mary Lynn and, in exchange, gave up all that was herself. Calculation? Yes, in a police report it would be called calculation.

Nobody was more surprised when Mrs. Poker died that spring than Mrs. Poker herself. So long had she played at being a brave ailing martyr that she had stopped believing in the reality of sickness or death. But the pneumonia that finished her off within a week was real enough, and there was much consternation within the gingerbread shell of the old house.

With a sense of vague guilt and reluctant gratitude Bess Poker discovered that her mother's painful penny pinching had served a secret purpose: unexpectedly and suddenly she found herself in the possession of a life-insurance payment her mother had never mentioned, a dizzy fortune of three thousand dollars.

There were many things Bess could have done with that money; she could have bought herself a fur coat or even a little car; she could have taken a trip to Florida; she could have finished college. But she did none of these things. Without any hesitation she took the crazy road, she accepted the great gamble: she staked herself and everything she was and had and ever would be on Mary Lynn.

"And then?" Inspector Fowler asked Bess. "Then?" Bess said, returning once more to the present, "after my mother's death I took Marylynn to Paris."

"You took her? How do you mean, you took her?"

"I mean we went there together, Inspector. She supplied the talent and I the money."

Fowler shrugged his shoulders and nodded to the stenographer. "Let's see what we've got so far," he said. Monotonously, the stenographer read:

"I met Marylynn about ten years ago. At that time she lived in my mother's boardinghouse in Brooklyn and couldn't pay her rent. I even remember the date: It was November 12th, 1936. We became friends. I thought I could make

something of her. I calculated on her future and hung on to her. After my mother's death I took her to Paris. She supplied the talent and I the money."

"Is that all?" Fowler asked.

"Yes, that's all, Inspector," answered the stenographer. It was almost four o'clock in the morning. "Well, Miss Poker," said Fowler, "I think we'll make a little pause now. I hope you understand that it would be in your own interest to be less reticent." He had pressed a button, and two cops came in and took Bess's elbow to lead her out. At the door Bess hesitated.

"Am I permitted to ask you a question for a change, Inspector Fowler?" she said.

"Go ahead."

"I would like to know whether Marylynn is dead."

"Sorry," said Fowler, "I can't give you any information."

Like a big rock the news had splashed into the sleepy waters of various hangouts where reporters used to meet and caused much turbulence, much breaking off of poker games, much scurrying to telephones. City desks were stirred into a frenzy, newspaper morgues were scanned in great haste; and when an optimistic A.P. man phoned from the hospital that Marylynn had been delivered there with still a faint flicker of life, hard-boiled bets were laid on the very

remote chance of her survival, while on the other hand sentimental obituaries were composed in the expectation of a fatal outcome.

A seedy-looking old reporter by the name of Bob Simms, who happened to hang about the 17th Precinct when Bess Poker was brought in, had scooped them all. At one time this Bob Simms had been the white hope of the profession. But certain disappointments with his wife, together with the ensuing inclination toward alcoholic beverages, had turned the man into a messy ruin. Shakily he legged it over to the dingy bar on Third Avenue that had become his second home. He tried to steady his nerves with a double scotch, and, taking the glass with him to the pay phone, he bellowed, hollered, and screeched his report to Joe Jenkins, the night editor at the city desk of the super-conservative *Star Tribune*. It was the sort of scoop of which any reporter may dream, and old Bob had visions of a complete and triumphant comeback; if he had been cold sober, he would have known better.

At first Jenkins didn't believe him; and when Bob Simms finally succeeded in convincing the editor that glamorous Marylynn had been shot by her shrewd faithful manager and alter ego Poker, he began to tear his hair and dance up and down in desperation. For here was the scoop of the year, and all Joe Jenkins could do with it was to throw it into the wastepaper basket.

"Jesus, Bob, I'd give my eyeteeth for this story, but we can't print it and you know it as well as I do. Since Marylynn broke her engagement with Mr. Huysmans we are not allowed to mention her name in any of his papers, and that's that."

"Not even when she gets killed? Don't tell me the Old Man can be such a fool! Playing the part of the jilted lover at fifty-four—revenge beyond the grave—why, Joe, the girl is dying, I'm telling you."

"It's no good, Bob. To the *Star Tribune* Marylynn has been dead ever since she gave the Old Man the slip. Thanks all the same, Bob. It's a beautiful scoop. Brilliant work, old boy. It breaks my heart. Well, I'll see if I can get you an extra ten bucks . . ."

It was hot and suffocating in that bar on Third Avenue, and Bob Simms dried his exhausted face on his soiled handkerchief. He felt like crying.

Joe Jenkins, at his end of the now silent line, had begun to perspire too. He gave himself a few minutes of absorbed indecision, and then he let the pent-up air explode with a little plop from his chest and called the switchboard.

"Connect me with Mr. Huysmans; he's at his place in Oyster Bay. Mr. Huysmans personally. Very urgent."

Alan W. Huysmans was not asleep when his secretary, Don Myrtle, knocked with a timid finger at his door to find out whether he wanted to accept the

urgent call. Not to sleep during the night had become a habit with the Old Man in the years when the tinkling of the teletype machine in his bedroom had played a steady accompaniment to his dreams and when being the powerful ruler of a newspaper empire had seemed the only and all-important substance of his life. But three years ago, after a certain crisis of a very personal nature and following the strict counsel of his doctors, the teletype had been disconnected and the world events locked out from the Huysmans estate. Still Huysmans was suffering from a malicious variety of insomnia; that is, he could fall asleep with comparative ease if only he went through certain complicated rites. A warm bath, a mild sedative, stoppers in his ears, black shades over his eyes, and the padded curtains in the big bay window drawn tight. But irrevocably Huysmans woke up after three hours of sleep to find himself in a state of feverish and bright alertness. It was the unpleasant and incurable condition in which a man of his kind would sharply remember every embarrassing moment of his life, all the way back to his early childhood; every mistake he had ever made; every smallest defeat or failure he had ever experienced; every little slight he had let pass by unpunished or unrevenged. Night after night the hours before dawn were thus filled with biting letters he had missed writing, with witty repartee and deadly comebacks he had failed to make—all of which was futile and didn't undo what was done.

And irrevocably all this brought Alan W. Huysmans back to the deepest disappointment and the bitterest insult he had ever suffered: his engagement to Marylynn that she had broken with a great stir and clatter in public life.

Even now, almost three years after he had received Marylynn's polite but definite rejection slip, his nights were full of Marylynn. The way she walked, the way she laughed, her hands, her skin that always looked and felt as if she had just come out of the ocean or walked against a fresh breeze; all her young lovely liveliness which had been within his reach and which had turned away from him to give itself to a vulgar and overpublicized marriage with that song writer, Luke Jordan. There was hardly anything Alan W. Huysmans had ever wanted but not got—and having wanted Marylynn badly enough to overrun all his own objections and to offer her his good old name and all the power and wealth that went with it, and yet not getting her, had thrown him out of balance.

His massive body propped up in the pillows, he was playing solitaire on a bed table; since recently he found this more relaxing than reading; but even the cards had a malicious way of not falling into the order he wanted, nor were they interesting enough to take his mind off the ever present issue. And so occupied had his thoughts been with Marylynn that the news which Joe Jenkins reported to him in blunt and straight words came not as a surprise but almost

as the finish to a pattern that had been shaping in his subconscious through the years.

He hardly listened to the respectful suggestions his editor put before him; he was a good newspaperman himself, and Joe Jenkins certainly could not tell him anything he did not know anyway. All he could think of, however, was that Marylynn was dead. He brushed aside the fact that she still had a slim chance of surviving. He did not doubt that she would be dead by the morning—because he wanted her to die. There had been many hours when he could have killed Marylynn with his own hands. In any case he had killed her as a newspaperman: by obliterating her name. But his satisfaction at the news was mixed with a thin, stabbing hurt. It was bad if Marylynn was dead, very bad. If Marylynn was dead he could never get even with her. His hands grew cold, his forehead was damp, and an uncontrolled pulse throbbed in his temples and hurt in his ribs.

After Jenkins had said all there was to say about the case and was running out of arguments, he waited quietly for the Old Man's decision. The silence in the telephone reminded Huysmans that some answer of a concise nature was expected from him. "My dear Jenkins," he said, and noticed with angry surprise that his voice was unsteady; he cleared his throat. "My dear Jenkins," he said, summoning the full Huysmans arrogance, "I really can't see that this is important enough to wake me up in the middle of the

night. A shooting brawl between a night-club singer and her manager! Probably they were fighting over Poker's commission. If you insist on mentioning it at all, I think that six lines on page eight in the local news would do the case justice."

With this he left his editor to his own devices, and, trying not to notice the disturbance in his heavily drumming heart, he returned to his solitaire. The cards still wouldn't fall right. Impatiently he put them down and pushed away the bed table. He called for Don Myrtle and sent him off on some special errand. After that, like a powerful motor warming up and settling down into smooth running, he moved with increasing speed and determination. He phoned the hospital and demanded to speak to the physician attending Marylynn. Dr. Bassington's famous bedside manner exuded even over the telephone; but when the last of the long and sonorous medical words had rolled off his lips, it was clear that he considered Marylynn's condition hopeless. He gave her another hour at the most, and Huysmans brusquely terminated the consultation.

Much of the Old Man's forcefulness derived from the fact that he never tried to analyze or understand the real reasons behind his actions. Just now he suddenly remembered the curt and sure way in which a certain Professor Meredith had brought him out of a frightening series of heart attacks three years ago, and without asking himself the why and wherefore, he had

his call switched to Rochester. It took only a few words with the eminent heart surgeon to persuade him to fly down to New York at once and take charge of the case. Huysmans arranged for the charter of the plane, and during the next twenty minutes he busied himself with some private investigations. After that he was ready for another talk with the *Star Tribune*.

"Listen, Jenkins," he said, "some information of interest has come to me regarding that shooting brawl about which you phoned me a while ago. It would seem that the last person with whom Marylynn was seen before she got shot was this fellow Dale Corbett. Now that's an angle we can't ignore. Let's find out how deeply he is involved in this scandal. Do we have a picture of the two of them together? And why not, may I ask? There certainly have been enough chances to get one, what with Mr. Corbett obviously having been Marylynn's favorite—er—escort lately. After all, if an opponent of ours gets into a jam—that's news we should be glad to print. Well, Jenkins, you know my principle of not interfering with the editorial policy of my newspapers at all; I'll leave it to you, but you may feel that this new angle deserves a more prominent space than you considered necessary. Get a picture of the two, if possible taken in a night club, play up the political side, make our readers sit up and think what sort of a fellow this Defender of the Common Man might be, and splash it on page two."

And with this he hung up and turned his attention again to the solitaire. It still didn't come out. But that didn't matter now, for while the second morning edition of the *Star Tribune* was going to press, Alan W. Huysmans suddenly dropped off into the sleep that had evaded him all night.

Dale Corbett was a tidy sleeper, and Frank Ferguson, who noisily tiptoed into his bedroom shortly after dawn to break the bad news to him, was almost sorry to wake him up. The young lawyer's handsome face looked surprisingly boyish and innocent in his sleep, and his hands rested relaxed on the thin linen sheet that was neatly tucked under his arms. Just as neatly his clothes hung over one of the surrealistic contraptions called Silent Valet; on the night stand was the correct selection of books and magazines an intelligent, well-informed, and progressive politician ought to have read, and a faintly humming air-cooling unit kept the room a fresh and cool island in the roasting, panting, melting heat-wave—New York. Ferguson, a loud, excitable and asthmatic man entrusted with the job of grooming Corbett for his political career, contemplated his sleeping charge with a mixture of angry relief and sympathy. Obviously, this was the deep and dreamless sleep of a fellow who had a clear conscience, a sound digestion, a well-organized life, and not the faintest idea of being involved in a regrettable and highly disorderly catastrophe. Ferguson

shook him by the shoulder, and Dale sat up, yawned, brushed back his dark hair, and smiled brightly. The little clock showed six minutes past three.

"Hello, Sourpuss," Corbett said. "Where's the fire this time?"

"I just had a very unpleasant talk with Mr. Carp. Very unpleasant."

"Who the hell's Mr. Carp?"

"*You* should know! The little guy who's doing all the publicity for your Marylynn."

"Oh, you mean Sid? Why, what's up? He promised to keep my name out of his shrill little press campaigns, and he did, so far."

"That's not the question. There's bad news, Dale, bad news," Ferguson said with a bronchitic sigh.

"Well, stop clucking, you old brood hen, and speak up," Corbett said agreeably, but through a crack in his smile there leaked the watchful expression of the alert politician.

"What did you do last night after our conference?"

"Why, nothing special. Stayed late in my office, listened a bit to the radio, had a bite to eat, and went to bed like a good boy."

"Stop talking like a lawyer," Ferguson cried, exasperated by so much glibness. "The fact is you picked up your lady friend after her radio show, you went with her to the Sans Souci, you treated her publicly to a bottle of champagne, you waited until she had

sung her three songs, and then you took her home in a taxi. Is that true or not?"

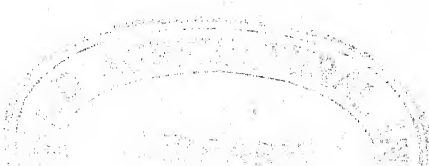
"I don't see why you're considered a heel if you drink a glass of champagne but a fine, regular guy if you get soused on six highballs; and I'd rather do it publicly than in secret. Anyway, let's stop bickering about Marylynn. I know what I'm doing."

"No, you don't!" roared Ferguson. "Stop bickering? Much good will that do us now, much good!"

In all his fights about what the older man called his unforgivable peccadillos with Marylynn, Corbett was certain to be right. It was tough luck that he wanted her so much, but that part of it couldn't be helped. He assumed that she played hard to get because she wanted him to marry her, now that she was divorced from Luke Jordan. This, he decided, was completely out of the question; if you were considered presidential timber you had to draw a firm line. Yet he wanted her so badly that it disturbed his work. He simply had to have her, get it over with once and for all, get her out of his system, and then continue on his way.

"Look here, Frank," he said, bridling up, "what's going on between Marylynn and myself is none of your business. I'm free, white, and of age, and furthermore, I'm not a eunuch. Does that settle it?"

Ferguson came charging in like a bull. "Eunuch or not, I've got to know what happened last night after you went home with that woman," he said.



When Corbett was angry he had an annoying habit of glancing just past the person to whom he spoke; he was very angry now. "I can give you the sordid details in a nutshell. I paid the taxi driver in front of Marylynn's house and opened the door for her as my mother taught me a well-bred boy ought to. Marylynn offered me a remarkably cool and sisterly cheek to kiss, which I did in a most restrained way. I thanked her for the evening and she said, 'Call me up next week or so.' Staggering under this amount of encouragement, I walked home, brushed my teeth, and went to bed."

At this Ferguson exploded. "Why the devil didn't you keep the taxi?" he yelled desperately.

"Why should I? I wanted some fresh air."

"At least you would have a witness that you weren't there when Marylynn was shot," Ferguson shouted in a final burst of exasperation—and that was the subtle way in which he broke the bad news to Corbett.

The young lawyer did not waste any time. Even while he jumped out of bed and hastily dressed he was planning his next steps; how to save himself in what at best would develop into a scandal and at worst into a disaster that would make mincemeat of his chances for getting elected as president of the New York City Council—the next step outlined for him. He did not worry about Marylynn, he only worried about himself. Ferguson was still sitting on his bed, moaning and befuddled, when Dale Corbett re-

turned from the bathroom completely dressed, his brave little mustache shiny with brilliantine, a whiff of shaving lotion emanating from his skin, and his decision ready.

"And where do you think you're going in the middle of the night?" Ferguson groaned as Corbett grabbed his hat and waved good-by.

"Put myself at the disposition of the police first, and then to the hospital. Where else?"

"Are you crazy? Police? Hospital? Take a plane, get out of town, disappear until this stink blows over! Go to Mexico, take a trip to Brazil, what do I know! Your name will be mud tomorrow morning anyhow."

"Listen," Corbett said quietly, "I've got to handle this my own way. I've got nothing to hide, and running away wouldn't make me very popular, would it? Can't you see the point? There's Marylynn—a beautiful, gifted, charming young woman; shot at the peak of her career; dying. The whole country will be rooting for her—and I should run away? No. I love her. My place is at her side, and that's where I'm going now."

Ferguson listened with admiration to his friend's tirade; he was overwhelmed by so much astuteness and almost moved to cry the easy tears of a political boss. Corbett put on his hat before the mirror. "By now the hospital will be oozing with reporters," he

added soberly. "I have to give them my version of the story before anyone else can butt in. So long."

"Well," gasped Ferguson, "if that's the way you want to handle it, I'll try to get hold of Sid Carp in the meantime and see if I can make him play ball with us."

Sid Carp had spent the last few hours in a press agent's nightmare. The horrible facts had reached him in the shape of a blurred, half-drunken phone call by old Bob Simms, who clamored for an interview with either Poker or Marylynn—whichever of the two would be alive and available. It was a wallop in the solar plexus, and Sid had first of all been very sick in the old-fashioned marble splendor of the bathroom of their little apartment in the Village. Rallying as best he could, he had gone off into all directions, leaving the little woman, Fishy, to her own strategy. He had been pushed around by noncommittal and rather blunt-spoken policemen, besieged and cursed by reporters, given the icy stare by tired night nurses and the cold shoulder by Dr. Bassington. With Marylynn unconscious and Poker kept incommunicado, he saw an avalanche of publicity tumbling toward him, unable to either stop it or steer its course.

At one point of this confused and unhappy night, when he came up for air over a cup of coffee at Raimondo's, it occurred to him that, worst of all, he would have to get the story to Luke Jordan before the

morning papers could screech it at him, and he went miserably into the phone booth to begin a search of Luke's usual late haunts.

Theirs was an old and weather-beaten friendship; it dated back more than ten years, to the legendary times which Sid called "B.M." (Before Marylynn) when he had been an office boy at the big advertising agency of Grayson, Caldwell & Grayson, while Luke Jordan was still an absolute nobody in search of his next meal. Their friendship was of the durable sort that consists of very many fights and a very rare exhibit of emotions, and it had outlasted all sorts of storms. It had even survived the big crack-up in their lives: Marylynn's separation from Luke. Their tight little group of four had been blasted and scattered, with Poker and Marylynn going their way, carrying Sid Carp with them (Barnacle Sid they call me, he would sigh at times), while Luke was left to his own turbulent and demonstratively gay kind of loneliness. But that old, tough loyalty between the famous song writer and the little press agent had remained unbroken.

Sid had so often used the soiled greenish walls of Raimondo's telephone booth as his private notebook that he had little trouble finding most of the numbers he needed among the scribblings there. But neither at Lindy's nor at Sardi's nor at Toots Shor's had Luke been seen that evening, and some research into various clubs and bars as well as into the more private:

realms of a certain chorus girl's apartment gave no result. Probably he's had enough of demonstrating to the world how happy he feels about his divorce and has gone to Nyack, Sid thought; the house in Nyack, where Luke and Marylynn had lived during their brief matrimony, was still the place where Luke retired when he was fed up with Broadway and with himself. Sid could hear the phone ring in the empty living room out there and asked the operator to keep on ringing, until at last the sleepy voice of Connie answered.

"This is Sid, Connie; sorry to've woke you up."

"Why, Mister Sid—did your baby arrive?"

"Not yet, Connie. Is Luke there?"

"No, Mister Sid; Mister Luke ain't been home for five days."

"Geez, but I've got to talk to him right now. Don't you have any idea where he could be?"

Connie, that dark, broad, honey-voiced, plum-eyed, warm-blooded offspring of some African tribal queen, had cooked for old Mrs. Poker, she had cooked for Bess and Marylynn during their rise to success, she had cooked for Marylynn and Luke and Poker during that short, stormy marital interim, and now she was left behind to cook Luke's lonely meals of a deserted husband. Sid, who had his rare moments of insight, wondered at times why Poker had made Connie stay on with Luke when they had split up. It seemed such an overgenerous gesture—almost as if

Pokey had wanted to leave a piece of herself in Nyack. . . .

"You's soundin' worried, Mister Sid. Is somethin' wrong with my young ladies?" she asked.

"You'll hear about it soon enough, Connie. I've no time now, I've got to chase up Luke in a hurry."

"Did you try some chasin' in your own parlor, Mister Sid? Maybe he wasn't feelin' so good and done gone to roost there," Connie said with a chuckle, and Sid beat his flat palm against his moist forehead, rang off, and called his own apartment.

"Hello, Pumpkin," said Fishy's wide-awake voice, and as so often before, Sid thanked heaven for having sent him the sort of wife Fishy was.

"Tell me, Fishy—Luke isn't at our place by any chance?"

"You bet he is; arrived half an hour ago. Brought me six orchids, two quarts of yoghurt, and some super-de-luxe electric egg beater which we both don't know how to work."

"Great Lord——"

"He thought the yoghurt would be good for you, and he thinks I'm a fiend for kitchen gadgets, you see."

"He didn't know yet what happened?"

"No."

"And you didn't tell him either?"

"No. He looked as if he needed a good rest first.

He's sleeping now on the davenport in the living room."

"A little drunk?"

"On the contrary. Stone sober."

"That makes it worse, Fishy."

"Yes, much worse, Pumpkin."

"Well, I'm coming home right away."

"Okay. I'm fixing some strong coffee in the meantime."

Ten minutes later Sid unlocked the house door and followed the traces Luke Jordan had left on the narrow staircase. A half-smoked cigarette stub, five impatiently burned-out matches, a half-filled matchbook angrily flung away, two cigarettes accidentally dropped from the package, a little hole burned into the door mat—and in the narrow foyer Luke's hat and necktie, another cigarette stub, and the crumpled empty package pushed into Fishy's nice flowerpot. Fishy was in the kitchen arranging glasses and cups, coffee and whisky, on a little tray. "Can't you let him sleep a little longer?" she asked. He shook his head and went on into the living room.

It was not unusual for Luke to take refuge with them whenever he reached the lowest depths of a blue mood or the highest peak of inspiration for a new song, and a certain routine had developed for such unexpected visits. As his bony six feet two was much too long for the Carps' davenport, he had learned to sleep there with his legs hanging over the

side; a litter of his belongings was scattered on the small coffee table which he used as a night stand. The lamp from Sid's desk had been transferred to it, and a few sheets of note paper with some sketchy music stumbling across them indicated that Luke had been struggling in the throes of creation before dropping off to sleep. His arms were flung out, and his enormous hands, which always had a life all of their own, moved in a restless dream. His beautifully made suit was carelessly thrown onto the upright piano, and his red hair—always the desperation of the high-class barbershop which he frequented—stuck out on all sides of his head. He sat up and was fully awake the moment Sid turned on the light.

"What's the big idea breaking in here and waking everybody up at this Godforsaken hour, you loafer?" Luke said with a wide white grin on his face that was full of shadows and sadness. Sid felt a little sick again, but he took a deep gulp of air and sat down opposite Luke.

"Take it easy, Luke, just take it easy," he said. Luke's expression changed and his eyes narrowed. "Well, shoot," he said.

"I'd give my right hand if I didn't have to tell you this," said Sid.

"Something about Marylynn?"

"Yeah."

"All right, let's have it," said Luke.

On the stage, in rehearsals, or while coaching

Marylynn, it would take very little provocation to set Luke Jordan off on beautifully tempestuous scenes and spectacular tantrums. But if Sid had feared something of that kind, he was mistaken. After he had finished speaking, there was complete silence. Fishy came in on soft felt slippers, and the tinkling of the glasses on the tray seemed very loud. A faint first thinning of the darkness outside made the night fluid. "It's very hot, isn't it?" Luke said at last. His face had turned white and moist, and on the sudden pallor of his skin the irregular pattern of freckles came out with a growing clearness like the shadow and light on a film in the developer. "Here's some coffee, Luke," Fishy said softly. He took the cup and drank absent-mindedly.

"I don't believe Poker did it," he said afterwards.

"Here, take some whisky," Sid said gently, "it's good for you."

"I think Poker is just covering up for somebody," said Luke. He got no answer.

"Why, Poker couldn't hit a barn door at three yards," he went on.

"The girls had a lot of target practice at old Huysmans' pistol range the summer they were up at the Grange," Sid reminded him reluctantly.

"Maybe so; but I'm sure they had no gun in the house."

"There was that Luger pistol Marylynn used for a paperweight."

"It wasn't loaded. It didn't function."

"Well, it functioned this time."

Luke began pulling his hair, as was his habit when he felt desperate. "But, great Lord, why would she do it? There was not a reason in the world!"

"When people fire a gun at their best friend they usually aren't very reasonable," suggested Sid.

"Maybe she was jealous," Fishy whispered tentatively.

"Jealous? Of what? There wasn't a thing Marylynn wouldn't share with her," said Sid. Fishy closed her lips tightly. Lord, aren't men stupid! she thought.

"Look here, Fishy," said Luke. "Call up Nyack, tell Connie what happened and ask her to bring me some shirts and things. I'll stay in town."

"Okay, Luke," Fishy said and went out.

"I'll never understand women; will you?" Luke asked Sid.

"Well——" Sid answered vaguely.

When Fishy returned she found Luke dressed; he had drunk all the coffee, much of the whisky, smoked most of Sid's cigarettes, and burned another hole in her davenport.

"What did Connie say when you told her?" asked Luke.

"All she said was: 'Poor Miss Bess.' "

"Poor Miss Bess?"

"She meant Poker," Sid said by way of explanation.

"Ah yes. Of course. Well, let's be going, Sid. We can't let Marylynn die."

Sid gave him a resigned smile. "How are we going to stop her?" he said sadly.

"I'm telling you we can't let her die!" Luke shouted in a queer rage. He pushed Sid toward the door, his red hair was blazing stubbornly, and he took the air into his large fists and squeezed them tight as if he were in the midst of a fight, strangling an invisible opponent. "Don't you see? If Marylynn dies, it's Poker who killed her. We can't let her die," he whispered. It didn't make much sense. Sid gave him a bewildered glance, and Luke pushed him out of the door.

Poor Miss Bess! Fishy thought after they had gone. Funny, but Connie is the only human being ever to call Poker by her first name. Indeed, poor Miss Bess . . .

By the time Professor Meredith, the eminent heart surgeon from Rochester, arrived at La Guardia Field, the second morning editions had reached the streets. They were flung in heavy bundles from trucks, spread out on newspaper stands, carried into the houses to scream their headlines at the early risers of the city:

MARYLYNN SHOT THROUGH HEART. CONDITION
HOPELESS, SAYS DR. BASSINGTON. SONGBIRD'S
EX-HUSBAND QUIZZED BY POLICE. TRAGIC ENDING

OF A BROADWAY LEGEND. WHO IS MYSTERY WOMAN ELIZABETH POKER? CITY PLANNER DALE CORBETT INVOLVED?

At least three sob sisters had been carried away by the strange coincidence that "Too Near My Heart," the hit from Jordan's first musical comedy, had been Marylynn's last song before a bullet hit her too near her heart. Altogether, the papers treated her as if she were already dead.

Professor Meredith went into a telephone booth to ascertain first of all whether the patient was still alive. He had flown in to please Huysmans, but in the back of his mind he was convinced that he would be too late. In that case he could visit his married daughter in Yonkers and spend a few hours with his grandchildren, all expenses paid. Dr. Bassington, at the other end of the line, sounded ever so slightly disgruntled as he reported that, yes, indeed, and against all reasonable expectations, the patient had shown remarkable staying power and was, at the moment, still alive. She was, however, in a semicomatose state; grave shock, pulse very weak and frequent, 140 per minute; blood pressure low, systolic 80, diastolic 50—probably she would die within the hour.

"Well, I'll have to look at her," Meredith said with a thin smile. He knew that Bassington took it as a personal insult if any of his diagnoses went wrong. On the other hand, if Bassington was right and the pro-

jectile had penetrated the heart muscle, the patient would unquestionably have been dead by now.

As in any hospital, the hour between six and seven was a very busy one. Patients were being prepared for operations, nurses' aides went around shaking sick people out of their merciful early-morning sleep to take their temperatures, breakfast trays clattered into the wards, and as the daily routine got under way there was an air of hustling, shuffling, almost cheerful activity in all the corridors.

The nurse, Miss Cripps, who had been assigned to the case in the middle of the night, fought against the sleepy and patient stupor that used to overcome her regularly at this hour. In the small anteroom Dale Corbett was reading old magazines without absorbing a word, while Luke Jordan was pacing up and down like a caged tiger, whistling or drumming jungle rhythms on the windowpane and driving Corbett crazy with it.

Sid Carp put his head in the door for a moment to report that Professor Meredith had arrived and was by now consulting with Dr. Bassington. He put a batch of morning papers on the table. "The *Star Tribune* certainly is after your scalp," he said to Corbett, and then he went out again. At the door he gave Luke a wink, and Luke got up and followed him on tiptoes, trying to keep his shoes from making that unpleasant noise on the linoleum which fills the corridors of all the hospitals in the world.

"Well?" he asked.

"Sorry, Luke, I tried my best, but was informed that Poker refused an attorney."

"Why, she must be crazy," Luke said, furiously pulling his hair. "What can we do about it?"

"Nothing. You know Poker. If she's made up her mind, there's nothing to shake her."

"Okay; that's that," Luke said, and returned into the room while Sid went back to the reporters downstairs.

It was still very early, the sky was covered with clouds, but a glaring, stinging heat-wave sun was already biting its way through them. Over early breakfast tables and across drugstore counters, in commuters' trains and truck drivers' joints, on ferryboats and milk wagons, the case of Marylynn was eagerly discussed.

"Killed? Not Marylynn! Why, she was so full of life! I heard her on the radio only last night—what a girl! I remember when she sang for us at the hospital, in Belgium that was—boy, she sure was fun! I saw her two weeks ago at Jones' Beach, in a bathing suit same color as her eyes. Oh boy! And eating hot dogs just like you and me. She sure was full of life then." Such were the discussions—for Marylynn's popularity was of the sort that made everyone believe that he knew her personally and that a part of her belonged to him. "Hiya, Marylynn," cabbies, truck drivers, and high-school boys would call to her when they saw

her on the street, and Marylynn would laugh and call back: "Hiya, kid!" People felt that she was one of them; that was why people liked her. When they turned on their radios they didn't need an announcer to identify Marylynn's husky voice, her theme song, and the inimitable persuasion of her singing. In their subconscious, men felt that for all her exceptional beauty this girl Marylynn was not out of reach; and women told themselves that, after all, Marylynn was made of the same stuff as they, and that, with a little extra effort and luck, every one of them could become just as attractive, popular, and successful. They all had a picture in mind that was simple and effective, like a poster: very feminine, all gold and aquamarine, a lovely, luscious young woman getting a lot of fun out of life—and welcome to it. It was—and this they did not know—the picture of Marylynn as designed and created by Bess Poker.

But in Room 35 Marylynn was lying, very flat, very quiet, very far gone on her way toward the beyond. She was what in hospital parlance is called Resting Comfortably. A thin wall of morphine stood between her and pain, between her and consciousness; but behind that wall her mind was wandering on dark and tortured errands. Her face was covered with a gray, glistening pallor, and the grayest thing in that shrunken gray face was her lips. From time to time a few thin bubbles of blood would appear between these gaping lips and Miss Cripps would pull herself

up from the chair in the corner, go over and blot up the red froth. They had given Marylynn a blood transfusion and kept her beleaguered heart going with a shot of caffein. Her breath came shallow and hasty and her heartbeat fought desperately against the pressure of coagulating blood that encased it tighter and tighter within its thin shelter of the pericardiac sac.

Then there was a little commotion at the door and two men rolled in the intricate apparatus for taking the X rays which Meredith had demanded before deciding for or against an operation. The noise stabbed through the clouds of weakness and morphine, and God knows what associations it set off in Marylynn's muffled brain; but the cruel and ironical fact is that she smiled for the fraction of a second as if it were not a picture of her poor, punctured heart they were taking, but another one of a thousand publicity shots.

In the anteroom Corbett put down the *Star Tribune* and dried his perspiring face and neck. Luke Jordan enjoyed watching his distress. "Don't you feel like the funny little guy in the maternity-ward cartoons?" he asked.

"Maybe you do—I certainly don't. For myself, I am wholly oblivious to the humorous aspects of the situation," Corbett answered stiffly.

"Oh, can it, Dale! Save your hundred-dollar words for your voters. And if this hanging around here

makes you so miserable, why the heck don't you scram? I've an idea that you are needed at your office more than here."

"It's open to discussion which of us is needed more here, you or I. I wonder if Marylynn would like to find *you* at her bedside when she comes to."

Luke's blazing hair seemed to get still redder as he put his huge hands on the table and bent forward to face the lawyer.

"You don't like me, do you, Dale?"

"On the contrary, Luke. You know that I'm a great admirer of your music and have been so for years. You may not care to remember that I got you the money for backing your first show, but——"

"Now listen, Dale," said Luke under his breath, "what do you want from me? You got Marylynn, didn't you? I gave her a divorce, I haven't seen her for ages. Why, I'm not even on speaking terms with her any longer. If I'm not jealous of you, what the hell have you got to be jealous of me?"

"I? Jealous? Don't be silly——" Dale Corbett began, but at this moment a nurse's aide opened the door to usher in a newcomer. Both Luke and Corbett turned around to gaze at the huge figure in the double-breasted Palm Beach suit and with the handsome gray pompadour. "If you'll wait here, Mr. Huysmans," the little aide said, "I'll call you the moment Professor Meredith comes out of his consultation."

If it had been in Huysmans' character at all to show it when he felt ill at ease, he would have done so now. "Er . . . good morning," he said to no one in particular. Luke Jordan gave him an amiable smile and cleared a chair for him. "Why, Mr. Huysmans, sit down; imagine meeting you here! That certainly is a surprise, don't you think so, Dale? Dale was just reading your morning paper, weren't you, Dale?"

Corbett had hastily pushed the *Star Tribune* under a batch of magazines and rearranged the expression on his face into a manner fitting the situation; there was the handshaking, the disarmingly trustful friendliness due a fellow member in the Yale Club who was also an eminently dangerous political opponent; the natural deference to a man of Huysmans' age, position, and power, mixed with the sympathetic condescension to an unlucky rival; and all this suavely tempered by the reserve which the place and the occasion demanded. "How are you, Alan?" he said. "And how is the health of your dear mother these days?"

"Thanks, very well indeed, considering that we'll celebrate her ninetieth birthday in September. And how are you, Dale? Very busy with the coming elections, I understand," Huysmans replied civilly enough, but ready for attack rather than for defense. Luke was watching the two with grim amusement. Under his glance Huysmans began to chafe, feeling that it was necessary to give an explanation for his presence. "I came here mostly to make some financial

arrangements with Professor Meredith," he remarked without convincing anyone, not even himself. "As long as he flew here on my instigation . . ." he added lamely, and the sentence petered out.

"Don't worry, nobody suspects you of an overdose of sentimentality—especially where Marylynn is concerned," Luke said grimly. Huysmans picked up the same magazine which had served Corbett as a camouflage and stared at its worn pages while thinking of a comeback. He smiled happily when he found it. "I'm sorry I missed seeing your show in Washington, Mr. Jordan. It never got to New York, did it?"

Here they were, three men whose every thought circled around Marylynn but who were stiffly refusing to admit it. The stale hot air in the small room was charged with tension. Behind the closed door which led into Marylynn's room hovered an ominous quiet, then a murmured conversation of the two physicians in there, and a breathless silence once more. Huysmans felt that all this was bad for his heart and that he should never have come here. A nurse appeared for a second in the chink of the door, put a finger to her lips, and left the three men in a cloud of mutual dislike. Not another word was spoken until, at last, the two heart specialists emerged from Room 35.

Professor Meredith went straight up to Huysmans and shook hands with him. "I'm glad you sent for me, Alan," he said. "It is a gesture on your part that will be widely appreciated." He focused his questioning

glance upon the other two men, and Dr. Bassington muttered some perfunctory words of introduction. "Uh," said Meredith, "how do you do? Excuse me, I'm still a bit deaf from flying. It's what planes always do to me."

"Are you going to operate, Professor?" asked Luke, impatient to come to the point.

"Dr. Bassington and I agreed that possibly the projectile missed the heart by a fraction of a fraction of an inch," Meredith said, studying the short-cut nails on his broad surgeon's fingers.

"You understand, there exists no doubt a hemorrhage in the pericardium," Dr. Bassington explained with some eagerness. "However, there seems to be a possibility that the projectile is lodged in the cardiac sac, and in that case there may be some prospect of saving the patient. However, I must warn you against being too optimistic."

"Dr. Bassington has done a miracle in keeping the patient alive until now," Meredith added perfunctorily as a soothing ointment for his colleague's ruffled professional prestige. "If you'll excuse me, Mr. Huysmans, I've got to go upstairs now and wash my hands."

Dr. Bassington cleared his throat. "I suggested last night that Miss Marylynn's family should be informed of her condition. I don't know if anybody—I don't think any of her relatives have arrived," he said

hesitatingly and looked in turn at each one of the three men.

"I don't think there is any family," Luke said. "Marylynn seemed always as unattached as a squirrel."

"That may be so; but there is this little formality, you see. As the patient herself is unconscious, someone will have to sign this little release for us," Dr. Bassington said, producing a blank out of nowhere and putting it on the table.

"All right, let's get it over with," said Luke, bringing out his fountain pen.

"Just a moment," said Corbett. "I think we should ask Sidney Carp first whether any of Marylynn's relatives can be reached."

"With all respect for Sid's omniscience," Luke interrupted, growing more and more impatient, "why should he know more about Marylynn's family than I do? He wasn't married to her, was he?"

Huysmans felt that he had been left out of the proceedings for too long. "I remember faintly Marylynn having mentioned that her grandfather had been a sea captain. Of course, I have no idea whether the old gentleman is still alive," he said; but Corbett had already gone out and returned with Sid, who looked more flustered and unhappy by the minute.

"The only person who really knows anything about Marylynn is Pokey. If anything had to be signed for Marylynn, Pokey had a power of attorney to do it.

But as long as police are holding Pokey . . ." Sid said fumblingly, but Luke had enough by now.

"Let's leave Pokey out of this. I'm going to sign. After all, I'm Marylynn's husband."

"You mean you were—but you aren't," Corbett broke in. "Neither de facto nor before the law."

"Oh, quit it, Dale. You know as well as I do——" Luke shouted, but was stopped by Huysmans' measured voice.

"I suppose that it will be up to me to sign this form and take full responsibility for the operation," the publisher said. "After all, it was I who asked Meredith to come here and risk the operation. Also, I am the one to meet all financial obligations. Therefore——"

"Sorry, Alan, but there you are mistaken," Corbett protested angrily. "I don't think Marylynn would like to accept this from you, and I am sure that if she recovers, as we all hope, she will take care of the financial side herself. In the meantime I, as her best friend and her lawyer, will sign the release."

Dr. Bassington's shortsighted eyes had jumped from one man to the next, trying to keep pace with their quickening argument. He sensed vaguely that there was more behind it than the simple necessity to put a signature on a document. However, he wasn't interested in the patient's romantic entanglements. Time was running out, and the release had to be handed over before they put Marylynn on the table.

"I suppose—this being an emergency—Mr. Jordan's signature might do," he said tentatively.

It was at this point that Dale Corbett let his emotions run away with him; he made one of the slips which caused his political friends so much trouble. It was the man Dale Corbett—an angry, jealous and infatuated man—against the politician Dale Corbett. "I won't have Mr. Jordan put his name on something that might decide over the life and death of Marylynn," he said, forcing himself not to shout. "It would be a farce, after everything he's done to her. Unfortunately, I have no legal authorization to speak for Marylynn. It never occurred to me that I would need such a document. But I might as well tell you here and now that Marylynn and I are engaged to be married. I daresay there is no one as close to her as I am and that I am entitled to act for the future Mrs. Corbett."

At that moment the door to the adjoining room opened and the stretcher with its motionless, white, sheeted cargo was wheeled out. A silence fell over the room, so deep and so sudden that it was almost like the silence at a funeral when the coffin is carried past. The two men who rolled out the stretcher, however, looked cheerful, lively, and well scrubbed; their arms sticking out of their short white sleeves had nice young muscles, and Luke couldn't escape the impression that the boys would make a joke the moment the door closed behind them. Miss Cripps followed the

little procession, and behind her came the little blue-aproned nurse's aide, looking important yet flustered. Then they were gone, and Corbett had in the meantime signed the release. Dr. Bassington folded it up and shoved it into the pocket of his white coat. He avoided looking at the three men, who all seemed paler than a few minutes before. "If you'd care for some coffee while you are waiting, you may ask at the reception desk for it," he muttered as he went to the door. Luke Jordan caught up with him before he was gone. "Dr. Bassington, we can't let Marylynn die. Do you hear me?—we simply can't let her die," he said fiercely; it sounded like a threat.

"Meredith is the greatest heart surgeon we have in this country," Bassington muttered noncommittally and closed the door behind himself. Sid Carp was at Luke's side. "Steady, Luke, steady, boy," he said while his own wretched stomach began riding on a merry-go-round once more. Then time stopped moving, as it always does in such hours, and each of the men thought of his best moments with Marylynn.

For Huysmans it had been the day he took Marylynn sailing. He saw her again like a figurehead, braced against the wind which sculptured every line of her body, laughing, her hair and face polished by the moisture of the spray on it. It had been one of the vibrant, thrilling, preciously rare moments in a middle-aged man's life when the mere sight of the woman he loves makes him feel strong and full of

verve, hardly past twenty. It had been a moment that made him dream of a whole crop of future sons and daughters, and Marylynn the mother of them all.

With Dale Corbett it was a certain evening when he had taken her for dinner to the Chambord. She had worn a white sleeveless dress fastened at the neck with one enormous aquamarine clasp, and he had admired the nonchalance with which she permitted the maître to hang her sable cape over the back of her chair. A slim, well-dressed couple stopped at their table, obviously pleased to see Marylynn and engulfing her in a quick French conversation of which he understood very little. Marylynn introduced him, and they exchanged a few remarks about the weather. There was handshaking all around, and after the two had left he said: "Nice people—I didn't quite get their name."

"Didn't you know them? The Duke of Windsor and Wally," Marylynn answered, completely at ease and unimpressed. At that moment he had felt that Marylynn was the greatest lady in the country; and when she permitted him in the taxi on the way home to kiss her, he also felt that nothing could stop him from becoming the greatest man of the United States. . . .

But what Luke Jordan remembered most was Marylynn's hand as she pulled him before the curtain after the opening of his first musical comedy. It was a trembling hand, dirty with stage dust and slippery

with the sweat of wear, strain, and excitement. When the curtain came down after more than twenty calls, Marylynn had thrown herself against him with the force of a young hurricane, croaking, all out of voice: "We did it, Luke, we did it, you and me, we two together, we did it!"

Such were the images the three men carried with them, always, and which they put before them while Marylynn went under the knife.

Then, after an interminable interval, the door opened and the little nurse's aide came in. The three men held their breath, and Huysmans was for a moment afraid of getting a heart failure right then and there. "This way, please," the girl said, holding the door open; but it was not the stretcher with Marylynn returning from the operating room.

It was, unexpected and unexplained, a young man whom none of them had ever seen before. He was about thirty years old and had a pleasant, open face, gray eyes under straight brows, and a short nose that gave him a naïve expression. His skin was sun-tanned, and beads of perspiration trickled from his corrugated forehead. He wore a blue suit that seemed somewhat tight over his muscular shoulders—the sort of suit boys' mothers had put away when their sons became soldiers and which after the war were a bit outgrown but still too good to be thrown away.

"Yes?" Corbett said inquiringly to the stranger.

"I am Lee Crenshaw," the newcomer said; he

smiled shyly at each of them, although the expression of a terrible bewilderment remained on his face. He stood there for a moment and then shoved Mr. Huysmans' hat and cane aside and let himself drop onto the rattan chair. "Mind if I sit down?" he asked. Huysmans scrutinized him with raised eyebrows. Luke paid no attention. Dale Corbett repeated: "Lee Crenshaw?"

"Yes; Lee Crenshaw. That's me," said the stranger. "I'm the husband."

It was half past eight in the morning when Bess Poker was brought into Fowler's office. "Well, did you rest a little?" he asked, noticing a faint change in her mental temperature. He himself had been at work for several hours, questioning Jordan, Carp, and Corbett, sorting out and piecing together the material the investigation had produced so far. Now he was expecting a call by Sergeant Feigelbaum, who had been left at the hospital with orders to report at once if Marylynn succumbed in the operation, or else as soon as her condition would permit a brief interrogation. Among the files on his desk Bess noticed the scrapbook she had begun pasting together at the beginning of Marylynn's career. It was opened on the first page, and Bess recognized the silly snapshot an itinerant photographer had taken of them in front of the Madeleine.

"Now then, let's go back to where we stopped last

night," Fowler said coaxingly. "You went to Paris. What happened there?"

"Nothing. We used up every nickel of my money and then we came back to the U.S.A."

"Why did you go there in the first place?"

Yes, why? thought Bess. Mostly because all her daydreams had always started with a trip to France. But also to get away from it all, away from getting hurt all the time; away from Luke. All her life Bess carried a little banner with her which she secretly unfurled at critical moments. Let's be rational about this! was inscribed on this invisible little flag. Let's be reasonable! Let's do the sensible thing! Well, it hadn't turned out that way.

"I took Marylynn to Paris because it was good for her," she said. "I couldn't give her an education, but at least I could give her a veneer."

"And did you?"

"Plenty," said Bess. There was contempt but also pride in the single word. Fowler pushed the scrapbook toward her. "Who is the man between the two of you?" he asked, pointing at the photo.

"That? Why, Luke Jordan."

"I see. You didn't say anything about his going to Paris with you."

"He didn't go with us. He came on his own accord a few months later." Bess did not know that she was smiling as she remembered Luke's unexpected arrival. He had walked quite casually into their lopsided



little room that was actually nothing but the adapted hay loft over a former stable near the Rue de L'Université. Marylynn was not at home and she herself was busy washing Marylynn's lingerie when Luke entered; a pink garland of Marylynn's flimsy little step-ins was strung from the door to the window, and Luke ducked quickly as he said: "Hello, Pokerface, I thought I'd drop in."

It knocked the wind out of her, but she managed to behave herself. "Hello, Luke," she said in a very small voice, "did you come on the subway?"

Luke had worked his way over in the three-man band of a third-rate steamer, and his entire luggage consisted of a toothbrush, a Panama hat, and a secondhand tuxedo.

"I got your letter; what's the trouble this time?" he said as he settled down next to the doll Emily on the couch.

"The usual thing, Mary."

"Did she meet another Nice Man?" he asked past the cigarette in his mouth.

"This one sells Bata-shoes to the Arabs in Marakesh, and his eyes look like spit-out cherry stones on a wet sidewalk—but he put ideas into her head."

"For instance?"

"He recommended her to the manager of a dirty little opera company that's going to tour North Africa. She went off behind my back for an audition. Got herself all dolled up in pink chiffon, and you

know how Marylynn looks in pink! She sang her god-damned 'Bell Song' from *Lakmé* and made such a flop that I can't live it down in a year. Not the shabbiest little agent would even listen to me—and you can imagine, Luke, what a mess she made of her voice with all that canary-bird coloratura. But that's what happens when Marylynn does things behind my back."

"Never mind, Pokerface. I'll straighten her out," Luke said—and he did.

Bess had to rationalize a lot during these months in Paris. But she worked her way through the hot confusion of her feelings, and in the end she had everything neatly registered and filed away; she emerged from that period still more sober and determined than before; knowing with finality that there was no running away and that she could never be sensible about Luke—all she could do was give a fair imitation of being sensible. If you were plain and without appeal you had to make the best of it; if you couldn't get love you had to content yourself with friendship; oh, Luke, my darling, just to be near you, see you every day, talk to you, listen to you, get hurt by you, inhabit a safe quiet little corner in your affection—yes, it was better, after all, than not to have Luke at all. . . .

Together they kneaded and pummeled and pushed Marylynn into shape once more. Luke was vastly impressed by the fact that Marylynn had learned to talk

French like a native. Part of it she must have inherited from her French-Canadian grandmother; the other half was sheer parrot. "Hers is a monkey talent," Luke used to say when he watched her mimic all sorts of people and sounds. He was a very busy man during that time and not a bit intimidated by the grandeur or the traditions of Paris. He made friends in the musicians' bustling hangout on Montmartre, he did business, he picked up little jobs here and there, and soon he earned enough to take Marylynn out dancing in La Coupole. With Bess, however, he went to the Louvre and to an exhibition of very abstract painters, admission free. He arranged French songs for the small range of Marylynn's voice and told Bess that he was simply crazy about the girl. As for Marylynn, Bess could never find out how she felt about Luke. "Gosh, he sure is nice," Marylynn told the doll Emily—the usual receptacle of her confidences. "What he can do with me is simply wonderful."

"Well, what does he do with you?" Bess couldn't help asking.

"Oh, everything. Sometimes he yells at me, and sometimes he kisses me, and twice he beat me up. He's crazy. But nice—I like him," she added as an afterthought.

In the end Luke got her placed in a hole in the wall at the Left Bank called Le Chien Blanc that was just being discovered by the tourist trade. With the money

Marylynn earned there Bess made an important purchase—an evening dress that was almost a Schiaparelli. That is, it was a copy made by a thin desiccated woman who had been a Schiaparelli *directrice* and had left the establishment in a huff. This dress and a clipping from *Paris Soir* were the only assets they brought back to New York. The clipping—three faded lines on yellowed paper—was pasted on page two of the scrapbook. It said that the Duke and Duchess of Windsor had visited the Chien Blanc during a night of slumming and that the Duke had remarked: "*Elle est donc superbe, cette Marylynn-là!*"

It was this clipping which became the cornerstone of Marylynn's career.

The telephone rang, and Fowler, who had watched during a long silence for a break in Poker's rigid countenance, took the receiver. It was Sergeant Feigelsbaum reporting that Marylynn was just being carted out of the operating room and that the operation seemed to have gone okay so far but that, naturally, she would be unconscious for several hours.

"Okay, Jim; stay there and report at once any change," the inspector said and turned his attention back to Poker. She seemed calm, frozen, bottled up in herself as before, and he decided on a slightly more aggressive tactic.

"I see here," he said, thumbing through the papers on his desk, "that you went to Paris in spring 1937

quite in style, in a first-class cabin on the *Ile de France*! September 1938 you returned on the little freighter *Lucille*."

"I told you we were out of money," Bess said, slightly irritated.

"You traveled in Luke Jordan's company?"

"By accident. He happened to play the piano on the boat."

"I see. Now then, we're back in New York. What happened then?"

"Nothing happened."

"That's no answer, Miss Poker. In the fall of 1938 you were penniless; you made your living by writing addresses, and Marylynn plugged songs in a ten-cent store. By spring 1939 she was the toast of the town. How did she do it?"

"She didn't. I made her."

"What do you mean, you made her? Like one makes a juke box?"

"Yes—exactly," said Bess, at last needled into anger. "With the chromium plating and the colored lights and every time you throw in a nickel out comes a song. Oh, what's the use asking me all these questions? You know all the answers, anyway. Why can't you stop poking around in my mind and stirring up the past? I shot Marylynn and I confessed. You've got a clear case; why can't you leave me alone!"

"Not so clear, Miss Poker," Fowler said, using one of his simplest tricks. "I'll tell you what I think of

you. I think you didn't fire that gun at all. I think you're covering up for someone."

"I? But that's absurd. Why should I? For whom?"

"For Luke Jordan, for instance," said the inspector.

It struck Bess like a high-voltage wire. "No," she said with the uncontrollable little gasp of a fighter hit below the belt. She tried to take hold of herself, but she was shaking with anxiety as she shouted: "Luke Jordan—but that's ridiculous! That's idiotic! It's outrageous—you aren't going to mix Luke up in this! I won't let you."

Fowler knew by her very rudeness that she spoke the truth and kept punching at her. "You are an intelligent woman, Poker, but you're acting very stupidly. If you don't want us to suspect a mystery you've got to stop being mysterious. As long as you refuse to talk——"

"But I don't refuse, Inspector. It's just—I'm not used to talking about myself," Bess cried. "I'll tell you anything you'll ask me, but leave Luke out of this. Believe me, I did it, I did, and I'm bearing the consequences. That's all."

"Now then," Fowler said, relaxing contentedly after the short flare-up, "how did you 'make' Marylynn?"

"I just kept pushing her for all she was worth. From her name down to the color of her nail polish she's my creation."

"And Marylynn—did she let herself just be pushed?"

"She knew what was good for her."

"Yes? But did *you* always know it?"

"Of course. Look at the success I made of her."

"With a bullet in her heart as a climax. You created her and you destroyed her—is that it? Why do you hate her so?"

"But I don't, Inspector, believe me—I don't. I might as well hate myself."

"Well, don't you?" Fowler asked. Bess closed her eyes under the blow.

"I don't know. Since last night I don't know anything. I was sure that everything I did for Marylynn was best for her, always. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was terribly wrong all the time," she said at last; she was very pale now, trembling uncontrollably. "Maybe I did everything wrong from the beginning. Maybe I should have given her thirty dollars bus fare the day I met her and sent her back to Blythe. Maybe that's all she was meant for. Maybe that's all she ever really wanted: go home, get married, have a couple of kids and a pink dress and chintz curtains from the five-and-ten. Maybe if I had listened to Jack, this terrible thing would never have happened."

Fowler grew tense as a pointing bird dog. "Who is Jack? What's his second name?"

"I don't know. A boy Marylynn had known in

Blythe. I saw him only once in my life. Come to think of it, I probably wouldn't have put over Marylynn if he hadn't shown up that night——"

"What night?"

"Eight years ago. The night we opened at the Club Pigalle."

The Club Pigalle had been a garage on East Fifty-fifth Street before Candescu took it over and turned it into one of the most fashionable and exclusive night spots of the late thirties. He had chicken-breasted Montmartre houses painted on the brick walls, with painted streetwalkers under painted lampposts, and painted little dogs sniffing at painted *pissoirs*. Everything was more French than the French themselves. The waiters from Brooklyn had to pretend not to understand a word of English, and the same potato soup the cafeteria down the street sold for a dime was called Vichyssoise and cost two dollars a plate. Candescu was a shrewd, bouncing little man from the Balkans who looked like a pregnant woman. Three months before opening the Club he began an expensive and amusing press campaign. Bess took the scent of it and said to Luke: "Luke, we've got to get Mary a spot in that Club Pigalle. It's our one chance."

"Why the Pigalle?"

"Because it's a phony—and so is Marylynn."

"Okay," Luke said. "I'll talk to Sid."

During his apprenticeship as an office boy at Grayson, Caldwell & Grayson's, Sid Carp had soaked up a

certain amount of the Great American Native Art of copy writing and related crafts and was now a fledgling press agent in search of clients.

"Sid, my boy, I'm stone broke and can't pay you a nickel now," Bess told him, "but if you could maneuver Candescu into giving Marylynn a spot in his floor show I'll give you a fat bonus plus your commission."

Sid gave a sigh. "That's a damn big order, Miss Pokle," he said. Miss Pokle was the name Mr. Grayson, Jr., had attached to her in the old days; take a letter, Miss Pokle, do me a favor Pokerface, let Poke-in-the-pen take care of it, ask Pokey what to do, why doesn't Pokey poke a bit? Even in school, no one had called her Bess; that was one of the reasons why Bess insisted on launching Marylynn with nothing but a first name. As for Sid, he had just married the loveliest girl in the world, a fat bonus was exactly what he needed most, and he accepted the questionable assignment with a fair amount of enthusiasm.

"But we've got to be clever about it," Bess explained. "I've learned my lesson; no more standing in line for Marylynn, no more begging for an audition. Candescu is the one who must do the begging. We'll put a French label on her and sell her as French import. I'll hide Marylynn, and you chase Candescu into discovering her. . . ."

Little Sid was well liked on Broadway for his helpless air of a babe lost in the woods; while his friends pitied him for being a born sucker, little Sid managed

to drop hints and clues at all the right places and rope everybody in as an unknowing accessory of his scheme. Marylynn's name began to pop up in the gossip columns together with the rumor that the Duke of Windsor had called her *superbe*. An interview was arranged in which she was presented as involving herself in very droll *double-entendres* for her lack of English; and Lucius Beebe was quoted as saying that Marylynn spoke the sort of French Elsa Maxwell would give her eyeteeth for if she still had eyeteeth.

Candescu swallowed the bait. And if he had his doubts about Marylynn's authenticity, he was too clever to let on to it. He gave her a contract with an outrageously low salary, but a formidable build-up. In the weeks before the opening, Luke pounded three numbers into her, and Marylynn was docile and obedient like a well-trained little monkey; whenever she was presented in public during that time of preparation, she talked and acted as French as French can be and seemed to derive an endless amount of fun from it.

In their little room Bess would look up from the stacks of addresses she was writing for a living and find Marylynn sewing bits of lace to scraps of silk. "What are you doing there? Knitting tiny garments?" Bess said nervously; every horsy line of her face stood out still harder and sharper during these weeks of tension, for everything was at stake with the outcome

of that opening—and moreover Bess's diet was limited in order to keep Marylynn sleek and shiny.

"It's going to be an evening gown for Emily," Marylynn answered.

"For heaven's sake! What does she need an evening gown for?"

"I'll have her in my dressing room, won't I? She's got to have that French *je-ne-sais-quoi* too."

"Say, that's not a bad idea," Bess said appraisingly, as she picked up a tiny linen square from the floor. "And what's this? Diapers?"

"I'm making her a dozen handkerchiefs, hand-hemstitched."

"You are a prize case of arrested development," Bess said irritably.

"Well, even a doll feels like crying once in a while," Marylynn said. It sounded so helplessly wistful that Bess put down her work, went over to the girl, and gently pushed her chin up with her knuckles. "She does, does she?"

"Yes. Sometimes she cries half the night."

Bess quickly sat down next to Marylynn and put her arms around her. It was one of the moments when, in the midst of all the driving and punching and the hard labor of forming Marylynn into the shape of her own dreams, she was overcome by a great fondness for the girl. And it was at such moments, too, that she herself felt ten times more old and ugly. . . .

"Don't you think Emily's just having a little stage fright?" she said softly.

"I guess so. And she is such a lonesome little doll—ain't you, Emily?"

"I promise you, if you make good at the Club Pigalle you'll have more company than you've ever dreamed of," Bess concluded and returned to writing addresses.

Three hours before the Club Pigalle opened, it was all chaos, unfinished walls, wet paint, scaffolding, dirt, and debris. But at the given hour, miraculously, it emerged as a place full of atmosphere and gay warmth. Bess caught a glimpse of the crowd every time a waiter passed through the swinging door behind which she had posted herself. There it was, all she had ever wanted: the glimmer of jewels and sequined dresses, the mingled scent of furs and flowers and powdered skin warm with dancing, the hum of bright conversations, the phalanx of smart-looking men around the crystal citadel of the circular bar, the names of celebrities on the cards of reserved tables. Here they were, the beautiful, the famous, the successful, the wealthy; here it was, a slice of that great, glorious, exciting, adventurous world for which every nerve of hers had forever hankered. Here it was now, at last within her reach: to grab, to conquer, to hold, to keep. If we lose out tonight, I'll die, she thought. But what she said to Marylynn a few minutes later was: "If you let me down tonight I'll kill you."

Marylynn was sneezing uncontrollably when Bess entered her dressing room. She was nervous as a grasshopper, sneezing in spurts and fits, hoarse with stage fright, and covered with goose pimples. Suddenly all the happy excitement went out of Bess, and she grew ice-cold. "Stop sneezing, damn you, stop being hysterical!" she commanded.

"I'm not hysterical. It's that damn smell of that damn fresh paint—my voice is gone. Gosh, and my stomach feels so sick—d'you know how it is when you want to puke and can't?"

But Marylynn looked wonderful in her Almost Schiaparelli that matched the color of her eyes; she looked exactly as Bess had designed her. All young gold and aquamarine, skin darkly gleaming with the remembrance of sun and air, hair lighter than the skin, as if she had washed it in a waterfall—a dab of gold on eyebrows and lashes and eyelids. She clutched Emily against her rebellious stomach, and the doll stared at Bess, desperately debonair in her new formal. For the thousandth time Bess cursed herself for not being Marylynn. In a moment of great lucidity she realized that she was off on a trip through purgatory, forever having to borrow the other girl's face and body and voice and limp little talent if she herself wanted success. It was then that she took Marylynn's shivering shoulders into her hands and said: "If you let me down tonight I'll kill you—so help me, God."

But the taut little second snapped. Bess began slap-

ping sun-glow powder on Marylynn's arms, and Marylynn said petulantly: "Where's Luke keeping himself?"

"How should I know?"

"He went upstairs to get me a drink half an hour ago and never came back."

"That's just like Luke," Bess said, and then she went out to fetch the drink herself.

The glamor of the Club Pigalle stopped immediately behind the doors leading backstage. Over the basement dressing rooms and on the winding stairs hovered a definite smell and aspect of old coal cellar, furnace room, and rat trap. Bess, a little dizzy with stage fright herself, was screwing herself up that murky narrow winding stair when a perspiring Greek waiter stopped her. "There's a gentleman wants to see Mademoiselle Maryleen," he said in his dockside French. Past the waiter Bess could see the gentleman, who didn't look like a gentleman at all, but like a boy who simply didn't belong in the Club Pigalle. His shoulders were so broad that they filled the entire width of the staircase, his face looked unfinished, his hands were big, and the dirt of hard work was eaten into the skin around the nails. He was buttoned tightly into a blue graduation suit and looked angrily aggressive and ill-at-ease at the same time.

"I'm sorry," Bess said, trying to brush past him. "Nobody can see Mademoiselle now."

"Oh sure, I can see her. Just go tell her it's Jack

wants to talk to her," the boy said, blocking her way. The name evoked a small unpleasant sensation in Bess's mind, and a second later she remembered that Marylynn had once or twice mentioned him. "Jack who?" she asked, to win time.

"Just Jack. Mary knows me. Just go and tell her."

"May I have your card? I'll give it to Mademoiselle after the show. But you definitely can't see Mademoiselle now."

"Mademoiselle my arm! You can't gyp me like those suckers out there with that phony Parlez Vous. I take it you are that Miss Poker Mary wrote me about."

"Oh—she wrote you?"

"Sure did. Regularly. Any objections?"

A trifle shakily the boy brought out a batch of letters and thrust them under Bess's eyes. Bess pushed them back: "Thanks, I'm not interested," she said coldly. She was angry at Marylynn for carrying on some silly sort of correspondence behind her back, and she also realized that the boy had whipped up his courage with a few drinks. "Well, if she wrote you, you'll know how important this opening is for Marylynn. You don't want to make trouble for her, do you, Jack?" she said appeasingly.

"You're darn right I'll make trouble if you won't let me see the poor girl—not a friend in the world and a person like you handling her as if she was a piece of juicy meat in the butcher shop. I know all about you!

And if you think I'll just stand by and let Mary go to the dogs, you are mistaken. 'This life is awful,' she writes me. 'I can't stand it,' she writes. 'I'm not cut out for this sort of thing. Please, please, my darling Jack, come and take me home,' she writes. Well, here I am and no one is going to stop me. I'll get her out of this. I'll take her home, and if I have to wreck this whole joint to do it——"

Look at Elmer! Drunk as a fish, Bess thought uneasily; she was trying to laugh off the unpleasant little incident. The boy had lost all rational ground under his feet and was shouting wild insults and threats into the dank air of the basement. He produced an amazing amount of noise and, while he was obviously drunk, Bess saw clearly that not all of this was caused by bourbon. It was the sort of craziness Marylynn set off in men whenever she chose to. A Luke Jordan would write explosive songs. A Jack from Blythe would scrape up his little savings, come all across the continent, get drunk in some bar near the Greyhound station, and make an obnoxious row in the basement of café society.

By now Jack had reached the point where he threatened to break up the show, to tell the world who Marylynn was and where she came from, to show her off as the phony and fake this bitch Poker was trying to make of her. Bess could see that he meant it. This wasn't funny any more. This stupid, infatuated, half-drunk boy popping up out of Mary

Lynn's inferior and slightly stained past could indeed wreck within a few minutes what she herself had built up with so much patience and self-sacrifice. At the top and the bottom of the stairs people began to collect, partly amused and partly bewildered, to listen to the huge noise. One of the cooks, his big triangular knife in hand; an effeminate young man in the getup of an apache; the magician in his Inverness cape who was to open the show; and the slim brown Brazilian dancer from 122d Street. It was a desperate moment, and Bess hoped to God that Candescu as well as Marylynn would be too preoccupied to appear on the scene.

"Shall I call Nick, Miss Poker?" an old waiter, gray with experience, asked behind her. Nick was a punch-drunk heavyweight in the costume of a French sailor whom the Club Pigalle had hired as a de luxe bouncer. In all his uproar Jack had heard the little question, and it set him off on a final explosion. By now he was calling in the police, he was going to the newspapers and telling all, and he was breaking Poker's neck. She watched him with close attention while her glands poured out that bit of extra energy and clearheadedness which she always had at her command at the moment of a crisis. "Thanks, I think I can handle him alone," she said. And turning to Jack, she added casually: "Stop hollering like a fool and come along."

Surprisingly, Jack stopped hollering and came

along; probably he thought that she would take him to Marylynn; but the door she opened led into the dim cubicle where the band kept their clothes and their instrument cases. "Now let's be sensible, Jack," she said. "You can't blackmail me." But by herself she knew that he could—he or any of the people who had known Mary Lynn before. This was tightrope walking on a frayed rope which might break any moment. A Ferris wheel of ideas began to turn dizzily in her mind. "I'll tell you what I'll do for you—and never mind the names you were calling me. You couldn't get a table in this place tonight if you were to plunk down a hundred dollars; but if you behave and be a nice boy I'll invite you to sit at my table. When the show is over, you may talk to Marylynn."

She could look inside the boy's brain as if his skull were made of lucite; he had by no means given in, but in his half-drunk way he thought to be very cunning by accepting her invitation. She made him straighten out his necktie and took him to the uninviting corner in front of the gents' room where a long table was reserved for the performers and their entourage. As she planted him on a chair and excused herself for a minute or two, she felt as if she had just placed a time bomb into the splendor of the Club Pigalle; it was ticking obstinately toward its final blast, and all she could do now was to try and detach the fuse cap.

She found Luke, happily drinking with some of the

smart young men around the bar and, in his second-hand tuxedo, looking smarter than any of them.

"Luke," she said, "there's trouble ahead. Let's do some fast thinking."

"Okay, let's," said Luke. He put down his drink and followed her.

Bess raised her eyes and met Inspector Fowler's gaze that had been resting on her expectantly. "I'm waiting for an answer, Miss Poker," he said with some sharpness.

"What answer, Inspector?"

"You were going to talk about Jack."

"Ah yes. I'm only trying to remember everything."

But Jack, in her memory, was shapeless and insignificant like a pebble, one of the many annoying pebbles over which she had avoided stumbling.

"Jack thought that he had some nuisance value, but he was wrong," she said.

What she remembered most clearly of that opening night just now was the feeling of sheltered security that came to her while she went downstairs with Luke; as if he had wrapped her into a snug warm blanket and carried her down the winding stairs with his own arms. That's the funny thing about Luke, she thought; you'd think him crazy and absent-minded, utterly impractical, childish, unpredictable. Certainly he is all that, but when you need him he is there, one hundred per cent. Yes, but where are you now, Luke?

she thought with a great urgency. Where are you now, when I need you more than ever before? "Did you arrest him?" she asked, suddenly cold with anxiety.

"Arrest whom? Jack?"

"Not Jack. Luke Jordan."

"Miss Poker," Fowler said sternly, "I want you to understand that we haven't arrested anyone up to now—not even you. We are holding you under suspicion, that's all, and we are at present not discussing Mr. Jordan but a certain Jack whose full name you claim not to know. Now if you would co-operate . . ."

Bess co-operated. She pushed Luke out of her mind for the time being and returned to Jack sitting with all the rigid dignity of a drunk and insulted man at that table in front of the gents' room. While she had spent ten minutes of the most concentrated and exhausting work, the first floor show had got under way.

As she sat down next to Jack, the emcee was just introducing the Brazilian dancer. Bess felt cold, like one of the many champagne bottles stuffed in their beds of ice, and the performance of the Brazilian dancer, the new gags with which the emcee pumped his laughs from the audience, and the extremely obscene little ditties the effeminate young apache flung nonchalantly around, seemed pieces senselessly cut from an involved dream. And then there was Marylynn, with Luke in her wake. The band put down

their instruments, Luke took his place at the piano, a spotlight was thrown on Marylynn, but hardly anyone stopped chatting in the crowd. Bess felt so sorry for the girl that she would have liked to rush up to her, take her in her arms, and tell her that she needn't go through with it. Marylynn was a shiny glorious perfect bit of youth—but not more so than some fifty creamed and garnished debutantes in the audience. At her side Bess could hear Jack breathing hard as a bellows, vividly working himself up into taking a wallop at everybody and everything. If their little stunt backfired, Marylynn would have to go back to Blythe, and if luck had it, Bess would find another twenty-five-dollar job and remain a stenographer for the rest of her life. Take a letter, Miss Pokle. Well, I can still jump off Brooklyn Bridge, she told herself. She didn't know yet that Marylynn belonged to the species night-blooming cereus; the moment a spotlight was thrown upon her she blossomed out as by the life-giving touch of her very own element. Her first number was the classic stand-by from Yvette Guilbert's program, "Marlborough se-va-t-en guerre." She did it fairly well, the emcee applauded with professional frenzy, and a few hands in the audience joined him in a mildly patronizing way. Marylynn said a few duly memorized words in French to the audience and went into her second song, a sentimental little number: "Ne m'oubliez pas, Cheri." Two verses in French and the last in her droll broken English. It

was that broken English that seemed to outrage Jack. His face was red, his chin worked as he was muttering louder and louder curses, and he lifted himself from his chair and banged his glass against the table—not to acclaim Marylynn but in a notion of stopping the applause and making a speech. Bess held her breath. Luke began playing the introduction to the third song, and Marylynn closed her eyes and, looking very angelic, gave them the first line of it. Then all of a sudden she stopped, threw another little French joke into the crowd. Everybody laughed, as everybody wanted to show everybody else that they understood French. Marylynn crossed her arms, grinning broadly like the little guttersnipe she was. It took them by surprise and the room grew silent. "Aw, let's stop pretending," she called down to them; "to hell with the French jabber. You don't understand the half of it anyway, and for me it's hard work. So you really thought I was the genuine article from *Paree, très chic, olala, hein? Tiens, mes chers amis*, you've been had. I'm just a small-town girl from Blythe, California—and what's wrong with that? What do you say, we'll all let our hair down and I'll sing you a song from back home? 'Coming In out of the Rain,' by Luke Jordan. The redheaded monster at the piano—that's Luke. Give him a hand, folks. One *and* two *and* three *and* there we go!"

It worked. The switch had come so suddenly that it bowled them over. The crowd was speechless for a



moment, and then they cut loose. They laughed and applauded and asked for encores and couldn't get enough of Marylynn. She gave them three songs by Luke—it was the first time any of his songs were brought before an audience, and they caught on at once. Candescu looked like a man just rescued from a burning house, and Bess knew exactly how he felt. Jack didn't say a word; green in the face, he got up, staggered into the gents' room, and was lost from her sight for the rest of the evening.

The next morning the papers went wild over Marylynn, and Luke, who retrieved them for her in batches, kept telling her that she could ask for the Empire State Building and get it. By noon Jack had recovered sufficiently to put in a meek phone call.

But by noon Marylynn knew that she was a success, and all she said was: "Me? Go to Blythe with you? Why Jack, you're nuts."

The telephone rang, and Fowler picked up the receiver without taking his eyes from Bess Poker's face. "Yes? Sergeant Feigelbaum? What's the news? Within the next hour or so? Okay, I'll be right over. . . .

"Now about this Jack, Miss Poker. What has he got to do with the shooting of last night?"

"Jack? Why, nothing at all."

"But you said before that nothing would have hap-

pened if you had listened to him. What did you mean by that?"

"I suppose I didn't mean anything. I assure you, you are off on the wrong track, Inspector. I told you everything I know about Jack."

"You don't know his last name? You never saw him again after November 1938 and he is not connected with the shooting in any way. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Now then, did Marylynn see this Jack again?"

"Not that I know."

"But you aren't sure, are you?"

"Yes, I'm sure. She forgot him completely as soon as her success started. I mentioned him once, and she didn't even remember his name."

Fowler closed the scrapbook and put it on top of the file. "Now then, Miss Poker," he said, very collected, "I'm going to ask you one more question and then I'll let you go. Did you know that Marylynn was secretly married?"

The sudden attack had the effect he wanted. Bess turned white, and for the first time she was thrown out of balance. "Yes, I knew it—or why do you think I shot her?" she cried out.

"Aha!" Fowler said, relaxing. "Now we are getting somewhere, Miss Poker."

"How do you feel now, honey?" asked Matron Martha Nestler; she was a handsome rock of a

woman, somewhat larger than Dorothy Thompson but not quite as large as the Statue of Liberty, and Bess was just one of countless girls who had collapsed on her solid, reliable, and not unkind bosom.

"It'll be over in a few minutes," Bess whispered, ashamed of her own feebleness. "I have these spells once in a while; it's nothing." She was familiar with the spasms which stiffened her body and let her neither breathe nor swallow while the walls moved up against her from all sides as if to crush her the next moment. Matron Nestler had found her in this condition as she came in with a duly examined and stripped suitcase that had been delivered for Miss Poker. She had put her down on the cot of the detention cell, undressed her, and was now drying the perspiration that streamed down Poker's long, lean flanks. "What about these scars?" she asked, tracing some large marks which looked like pale continents edged into the olive skin of Poker's left thigh. Poker made a strong effort and broke the cramp; the walls began to recede, and a few seconds later she could swallow too. "It's all one and the same thing—the scars and the fits. The souvenir I kept of the Cypress Grove fire. I suppose you've heard of it."

"Dear me! Don't tell me you've been in that? How long ago was that? Five years?"

"Almost six. But when I have those nervous attacks it always seems as if it were happening all over again."

The fire in the swanky Palm Beach night club had been one of the great disasters in which more than a hundred people had lost their lives; the matron felt something like respect for this girl who had lived through it, only to find herself up for murder a few years later. Poker's rigid limbs now began to dissolve into a fluid tremble, and Matron Nestler, stroking the scarred tissue, felt sorry for her. The matron was in the habit of classifying people after the animals whom they resembled, and this strong, trembling girl struck her with the same pity she would have felt for a horse fallen by the wayside and trying in vain to get up again. "Some burns these must have been," she said, gently pressing her hand on the continents of damaged skin. Bess shook her head. "Not burns; they took some of my skin to graft it on Marylynn."

It was not easy to surprise Matron Nestler, but now she was surprised. "You don't say! You mean Marylynn went around all the time with scraps of your skin on her?"

Yes, Bess thought melancholically; the olive-drab leather in which I happen to be bound was still good enough to patch up Marylynn's golden beauty. "They used it only where it didn't show," she said with infinite self-irony; the whole horror of that night came tumbling down upon her once more, and she began again to struggle for air.

"Now don't get worked up all over again, honey. Here, take a sip of water. Don't fight it, just let go.

Of course you can swallow if you put your mind to it, now don't get frightened. I'm staying with you. Think you might feel better if you talk about it?"

"Maybe I would," Bess said gratefully; the attack had left her too weak to keep up her usual defenses, and for once talking seemed a relief.

"The funny part is that when you are caught up in such a thing you don't know what happens; any soldier who's been in combat will tell you that," she began, relaxing by and by under the long, gentle strokes of the matron's firm hand. "And it all happened at the wrong moment. I mean we both were enjoying ourselves so much just then, and Marylynn had always wanted to go to Florida. So when Luke Jordan got himself a Hollywood contract that winter and she didn't, it made her actually sick. When he went off to California, the only medicine I knew was getting her a spot in Palm Beach. It was the first time that their team was broken up, but I was sure that it was necessary for Marylynn to get independent of him and learn to sing with a band. Not that we didn't miss him," Bess said, smiling at her own understatement as she remembered at what cost she had tried once more to break away from Luke. "Afterwards Luke kept telling me that nothing would have happened to us if he had been around," she went on, plunging once more into the inferno of that night. "I wonder. I've asked myself ever since what he could have done that I didn't.

"I think I was actually the first person in the Cypress Grove to notice the start of the fire—only I didn't realize what was happening. It was a very smart night club, or I wouldn't have let Marylynn sing there; but you know how flimsy even the smartest night club is when you look at the back side of its picturesque atmosphere. This one had cardboard cypresses hung with real Spanish moss, and it was crowded to the rafters, for Marylynn packed them in. I was sitting at my usual little table behind one of the cypresses, and the moment Marylynn came on the floor I knew something was wrong. I myself had carefully arranged for a special baby spot to be thrown upon her hair; it brought out that funny quality of its color, like freshly cut wood. That baby spot was missing, and I thought angrily that the electrician must be asleep. Marylynn was in top form just then, and the two years of success had given her so much poise and sparkle that she could do with the audience whatever she wanted. You know how a girl of twenty-two will shine when she is in love. Well, Marylynn had never been in love with a man, as far as I could see. Flirts, yes, moods, whims, fun with men, romances, affairs; love—no. But she was in love with her audiences, and the audiences could feel it and paid good money for being loved by Marylynn. There she was, radiant and perfect, except for that missing baby spot on her hair. I looked automatically at the cable snaking along the ceiling; that was how

I saw the first little sparks jumping into the tindery decoration. Short circuit, I thought; I didn't want to make Marylynn nervous by getting up; she always kept her eyes on me during her number. But I beckoned one of the waiters and asked him to go backstage and tell the electrician that something was wrong with the wire. While I was still waiting for that baby spot to come on, I saw a tiny flame leap out from the cable, and a second and a third one. I believe I smiled at it like an idiot. It was almost fun to watch those little flames, they seemed so completely playful and gay. When the lights are turned down during the floor show a night club is always full of little sparks, glowing cigarettes, or a man striking a match, and suddenly you will see a woman's face in the tiny flare, and there are always some candles on someone's birthday cake. And there is smoke, too—I always loved those curtains of blue smoke behind which the performers look a little unreal; and so I remained unconcerned and watched with an idiotic curiosity how a little tongue of flame started to creep down a strand of Spanish moss. And then, suddenly, from one second to the other, a silk drapery broke into a flash of fire. It still looked beautiful—like a balloon of flame it floated down—and then there was a horrible shriek at one of the tables and the people around it disappeared in that flame. A woman in a blazing dress raced across the floor as if hoping to run away from the flames that streaked out from her hair

and her sleeves and her skirt. The next moment everything seemed to have caught fire at once. There was a roar as when you throw batches of old newspaper into a furnace, there was shrieking and screeching as if the walls themselves were crying out, and the stampede was on.

"I don't know what happened to me, except that I wanted to reach Marylynn and was too paralyzed to move a finger. I suppose I myself had pumped her full with a foolish notion that *The Show Must Go On*. For there she stood, carrying on her song with that glorious, stupid, terrible courage of a well-trained performer. A few men in the band kept on playing, and then they, too, threw down their instruments and clambered over each other's chairs in a wild scramble for the exit. I don't remember how I made my way through that hissing, screaming, roaring, crackling trap of a night club. I suppose I must have crept along under the tables, because I saw nothing but feet stomping over the faces of people who had been crushed to the floor. In my chart which the hospital gave me later as a souvenir, I could read of my bruises, lacerations, concussion, and what not. But I didn't feel any of the blows I must have received on my trip toward Marylynn. I had almost reached her when I saw in all the smoke some burning scraps of Spanish moss fall down on her and set her hair on fire. I can't say that I suddenly knew what I had to do, but, thank God, in such moments instinct takes

over when the brain gives up. I lunged forward in a sort of flying tackle—the technique came suddenly back to me out of my childhood, when the neighborhood boys had allowed me to pitch in for a kid that had the measles—I felt Marylynn's knees between my arms and brought her down to the floor; I threw my mink coat over her—at that time we had reached the mink-coat stage—and choked the flames that had begun to eat into her flesh.

“The smoke was blotting out the meager exit signs at the side door, and the panic swept the whole crowd into one direction, toward the stairs which led up to the swinging door off the main entrance. That is where most of them got killed. All I knew was that we had to go against the current. It wasn't easy, but, you see, in a way I'd done it all my life: go against the current. Marylynn was whimpering with pain. As a cypress near us broke into flames I could see in the glare what the fire had done to her poor face. Her hair, her eyebrows and eyelashes were gone, and one side of her face was a raw mass of blisters. ‘I'm blind,’ I heard her sob in all the uproar; ‘Jesus, help me, Pokey, I can't see anything, help me, I'm blind, please help me, help me.’ She wanted to push forward with the others toward that horrible stairway where the bodies began piling up even then. I had to fight, and fight hard, to pull her in the opposite direction. ‘Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, Mary, I'll get you out of here,’ I screamed into her ear. At

last she seemed to understand me, she gave up struggling and hung onto my hand, suddenly obedient as a little child. I could feel she trusted me, and that made me think and act with some sense for both of us.

"The backstage of the Cypress Grove was the same rabbit burrow it is in most night clubs, but I knew that there, at least, would be no draperies, no cardboard cypresses, no tinsel, no panic-crazy crowd. If we could reach the concrete tunnel behind the bandstand maybe we would be safe. But between us and the door giving onto that corridor stood a solid sheet of flame. If Marylynn hadn't been blinded I could never have made her go with me through that terrible blaze. As it was, I wrapped her still tighter in my fur coat; my poor expensive mink had not a hair left, and through all the stench and smoke I could smell it like a singed chicken. On a table I saw a steaming tablecloth. Probably wine had been spilled on it and soaked it through. Funny how unbelievably clear some details stand out in such a moment. I snatched it up, it was scalding hot, but still damp, and I wrapped it around my own head. When I was a little girl my father had taken me to the circus, and there I had seen a man in a hussar uniform jump his horse through a fire. God knows where I had pigeonholed that memory, but there it was suddenly to brace me up. It could be done. If that circus rider could do it, I could too. I was glad

Marylynn couldn't see where I was taking her; she let herself be led like a baby. There were no people at this end of the room, only that sheet of fire. I was walking up against it, faster and faster, pulling Marylynn with me. Then we were in it, there were flames before us and behind us, and the heat was terrible—colder than any coldness you can imagine. Then, we were past it, and I threw myself against the heavy blistering door at the back. It gave, we tumbled through and were in the narrow corridor. It was quiet and dark and the fire was gone. At the other end of that long black tube of concrete I could even see a dim naked light bulb over a door. I pulled Marylynn toward it, hoping to find the kitchen and get out by the back where the garbage cans were stacked. By then I could hardly see anything myself, and that little signal of a light bulb disappeared as the tunnel filled with smoke and more and more smoke; bales of smoke, as if someone were pressing black cotton against my mouth and eyes and nose. It rasped down my throat like a file and wanted to choke me. But I reached that door under the little bulb; I still had my right hand around Marylynn's wrist and pulled her with me; when I pushed the door open with my left I felt that my palm stuck to it. More of that frozen cold pain shot through me as I tore it away with an effort. I shouldn't have been surprised when I saw that the skin of my hand was hanging in blisters and tatters—but I was, and it turned my

stomach. Now we were in a small storeroom, there were shelves up to the ceiling, rows and rows of cans, boxes, little barrels, bottles with oil, olives, pickles, cherries. A bulb was burning here, too, and it was comparatively safe and quiet, although the roar of the holocaust was not very distant. I discovered a window which seemed to give onto the street or the back yard, for out there I could hear the sirens of the arriving fire engines and a steady shrill high noise—a funny noise like hundreds of giant crickets on a summer night; only these were people screaming. Then came the worst moment. Suddenly there was a new cracking sound, a tinkle of falling glass as the window burst in the heat that beat against it from the outside. Instead of air a thick yellow flame stabbed through it, and more of that horrible black smoke came pushing in like an enormous fist. It strangled me. I hunted among the boxes and bottles and cans for a way out of that horrible trap of a storeroom. Marylynn had been whimpering timidly like a sick child through all of it, but now she gave a loud moan. A racking cough shook her, and then I suddenly felt her wrist go slack in my hand and she crumpled in a little heap on the floor. I was babbling incoherently and was surprised when I heard myself praying aloud. I don't know how much God had to do with it, but through the sickening smoke something kept gleaming and I focused my eyes on it with a very great effort. There was very little clear

thought left in me, and I had to strain my brain to the last to understand that this was a door handle—not an ordinary handle, but a long piece of metal, a gleaming sort of lever. I left Marylynn on the floor and tried to push that lever down. It didn't give in—but neither did I. Suddenly I knew that this was the heavy metal door to the walk-in refrigerator; behind it was safety, cold fresh air, life. I hung myself to that lever with every ounce of my weight until it finally gave. The heavy door creaked open; I gathered all my strength, pulling Marylynn inside and slamming the door shut before the smoke could follow us.

"It was dark inside, but I found the switch and turned on the light. It was very cold and very clean there; the sides of bacon and pork and beef were hanging from the huge hooks, and for some reason they seemed very funny to me. I wanted to laugh, but I told myself that this was not the time for hysterics and I managed to hold onto myself. Every inch of me began to hurt now, and every inch with a different sort of pain. I knelt down on the clean cold tile floor; they had put sawdust on it in which I could see the prints of the cook's huge feet. Carefully I peeled my poor mink coat from Marylynn's head and shoulders because I wanted to bed her on it. She was in a deep faint, and I was glad for her, because now I could see for the first time what the fire had done to her face.

"That's when I had another talk with God, and this time I got tough with him; because if there was any sense in it and if someone's face had to be ruined, it should have been mine and not Marylynn's. I didn't mean that in a sentimental way, but as a woman in business. Marylynn's face was one of our main assets while mine had always been on the debit side. While I was kneeling there among all the dead pork and beef and waiting for someone to come and rescue us, I asked God and myself what in the world should become of us if Marylynn's face and beauty were lost for good, and there was no answer to my question as far as I could see."

Abruptly Bess stopped talking, for this was dangerous ground. She felt herself caught in an evil circle; wherever she started, it took her back to the happenings of last night. Then, too, she had asked how to go on without Marylynn, and, not getting an answer, she had blindly grabbed for the gun. She was shivering now as she had shivered six years ago, staring down into the wreckage of Marylynn's face. Last night again she had been bending over Marylynn's limp body and wished to be in her place. The matron, although not of a very impressionable nature, was impressed. "I must say, they should have given you a medal for lifesaving, honey," she said with sincere appreciation.

"I'm afraid I dramatized myself a bit just now.

There was nothing heroic about dragging Marylynn with me as far as that meat box. What came afterwards was much harder. You see, I was at the end of my rope. I wanted nothing as much as to let go and lie down and allow myself to faint too. But I knew I couldn't do it. I knew I had to stand guard over Marylynn, and I did. It was the hardest thing I ever did in my life, and all the pain and the skin grafting and the mess that came later was easy compared with it. It took years before they found us, and more years in the ambulance. I was just a piece of frozen, cut-up meat myself by then, but I didn't faint: Not while I waited our turn in that endless row of stretchers in the hospital corridor, and not when they carried Marylynn into the operating room. I'm still proud of that. I hadn't much strength left, but enough to fight it out with the doctors—and, believe me, it was a tough fight. I won it. I didn't let any of their overworked, panic-stricken little interns touch her. I hollered and screamed and didn't let them butcher her up and stitch her up any old way and ruin her looks for good. I insisted on their calling in Dr. Wieselfinger; you know probably that he is the best cosmetic surgeon in the country, and it was lucky for us that he was taking a little vacation in Florida just then. Yes, whatever else I might have done wrong, I'm still proud of the way I handled things that night. Only after Dr. Wieselfinger had taken charge of Marylynn did I let go, and then I remained un-

conscious for seventeen hours. Or maybe they doped me because they were afraid of me."

"I know your kind," Matron Nestler said out of her store of practical psychology. "Always showing off how tough you are—but you aren't half as tough as you think. Then suddenly comes the big crack-up. When I think of all the things you've done and sacrificed for that Marylynn woman——"

"Oh no. With us it was give and take."

"Maybe so. But she must have done something awful to make you want to kill her in the end. Tell me, what did she do to you? Try to steal your man?"

Bess gave a clipped little laugh. "There never was a man to be stolen from me."

"No? Don't tell me a handsome smart girl like you would go through life without a bit of romance. Well, now you're laughing. Getting a little color, too," the matron said, satisfied as a slow blush painted Bess's high cheekbones.

"Thanks," she said; "everybody tells me that I'm smart, but nobody ever called me handsome."

"Now you're looking different altogether. I knew it would do you a lot of good to talk a bit. Feeling better now?"

"I don't know; it's a bit like coming out of the anesthetic after an operation. Still numb and hazy, but you begin to feel the pain——"

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but my advice is that you get yourself an attorney right now. With

those nervous fits of yours and what you told me about that fire, I bet you a good lawyer could get you off easy with any jury. I understand that Mr. Dale Corbett has offered himself several times to take over your case; and whatever else you might think about him, he certainly is a clever lawyer."

Immediately Bess's face took on a frozen and obstinate expression and she locked herself up again. "No, thanks all the same, Matron," she said with a coldness that kept itself barely this side of being rude. "I don't want an attorney. I don't want to be let off easy."

Matron Nestler shrugged and got up from the cot; she was a little huffed. "Well, it's your funeral, honey," she said. "I can't spend all my time on you. I only came in to give you your suitcase. A colored woman brought it for you."

Connie, Bess thought, and for a second there was the warm good smell of yeast and cinnamon and breakfast in Connie's shining kitchen. "Did she say anything?" she asked softly.

"She said she packed everything you might need in the next few days and you should put on your nice chartreuse dress and lacquer your nails nicely, 'twould make you feel good. And she said bless you and she was praying for both of you."

The matron shook out her skirt, yanked down her corset, and went toward the door. Only a few seconds later did the news which was implied in Connie's

message connect with something in Bess Poker's brain.

"Both of us? But that means—that means Marylynn is alive?" she cried out. The matron, her face turned away from Bess, hid a little smile behind her rocklike chin. "I guess I let something slip out there, didn't I?" she muttered humorously.

It was as if Bess Poker had been sleepwalking up to this very moment. Suddenly she found herself, cold and bare, staring at a reality which some defense mechanism in her had tried to conceal. The sharp jail smell—of disinfectant, punitive cleanliness, frightened people—stung in her nostrils like smelling salts and cleared her brain. What am I doing here? Why do I lock myself away? I must be crazy, she thought in a fierce onrush of every instinct of self-preservation. I want to talk to people, I want to know everything, what happened to Marylynn, what is going to happen to me—and for heaven's sake, what is happening to Luke?

"I want an attorney," she cried. "Any attorney! At once!"

"Now you're talking," said Matron Nestler as she bustled out of the door.

EVERYTHING WAS WHITE when Marylynn opened her eyes, but the whiteness did not come in one piece; it moved toward her in slowly swaying patches which ran into each other as they arrived very close to her face and then coagulated into something that opened an enormous mouth and said: "I'm Miss Cripps."

The return trip from the faraway had been very long and exhausting, and Marylynn felt too tired to move as much as the tip of her tongue. But her lips were cracked and dry and she was terribly thirsty. "Don't move, dear," said the apparition which called herself Miss Cripps, receding and breaking up into pieces again. Marylynn focused her eyes on the snow landscape before her; by and by it became familiar.

The endless plains her glance had to cross were a white hospital blanket, and those hills yonder would be her knees propped up on a pillow. Miss Cripps, then, must be the nurse. "Water," said Marylynn. "Don't talk, dear," said Miss Cripps. "I'll get you a little sip of water soon." Marylynn felt sorry for herself and wanted to say so, but in the meantime she was pleasantly pulled back into rest and there was another stretch of nothingness. When she came to the next time she brought along an amazing parcel of knowledge: She was in a hospital; she was badly hurt although neither the nurse nor the doctor nor Poker would tell her for a long time how badly. They would keep her doped to make the pain bearable, and that was kind of them. And they would want her not to remember the fire, which was silly of them, because she remembered every bit of it. She wanted to touch the burns on her face, but lifting her hand was almost impossible. "Don't move, dear," said Miss Cripps. Marylynn found her hand on the blanket, then her arm, then the needle that was taped to the vein in the crook of her elbow, then the hose that swung up to a glass contraption on a high stand. Drip injection—glucose—Marylynn remembered with the wisdom of one who has spent months between life and death in a hospital. As she went on exploring she discovered several arrangements which were not as they should have been. The name of the nurse was wrong, for instance; also the window rectangle, with

the blind down but the glaring Florida sun penetrating it, should have been more to the left. And there were no bandages on her face. If they had taken off the bandages, it meant that she had been in this hospital quite some time and that it must be more than two months since the Cypress Grove burned down. I know, she thought; I fainted when I saw myself in the mirror after taking off the bandages. As she grew clearer yet, she began to take great interest in certain details. "Where is Emily?" she asked, because she knew that Emily had been rescued almost undamaged from the fire; Luke had bought Emily a new dress and a new wig, and he himself had brought her to the hospital for company while Marylynn was recovering. And now Emily wasn't there again.

"Don't talk, dear," said Miss Cripps. "Whom do you want to see? Emily? I'm sure she'll visit you as soon as you can have visitors." For how should poor overworked Miss Cripps divine that her patient's mind had not regained its grip on the present and was still wandering through the labyrinths of a past accident? She took Marylynn's pulse, which was still racing, although hopefully down to 120 by now. A little color, too, had returned to her lips, and maybe Professor Meredith had worked one of his surgical miracles again, much to the chagrin of Dr. Bassington. Miss Cripps, who didn't care for Dr. Bassington,

scribbled with faint satisfaction the small signs of improvement into Marylynn's chart.

"Where is Pokey?" Marylynn whispered. "How is she? What happened to her? Why isn't she here?"

"Now don't talk so much, dear, it's bad for you. Try and doze a little more."

"Did Pokey get burned badly? My poor Pokey!"

"Now be quiet, dear. No one got burnt."

"You don't know what Pokey did for me. She saved my life."

"Sure, sure. You'll be all right, dear, and your Pokey will be all right too," Miss Cripps rattled off in ignorant routine.

"That's good," Marylynn said contentedly. She closed her eyes, and the hospital bed swayed away with her like a gentle gondola.

Hour after hour she had to swim across the dark waters of unconsciousness and almost-death, only coming up for brief spells of air. Every time her mind grew clearer and the contours of what lay in store for her became less fuzzy. It was, in fact, amazing how much she knew of the things that were going to happen. There was no pain yet, but there would be very much pain and great discomfort before she would have a face again. But there would always be Pokey and Luke to preach patience and to pump some of their own ambition and courage into her. Her eyebrows would be the first to grow back again,

and her eyelashes, thank God. And her hair would sprout, the same color as before and just as rich and shiny. There would be great jubilation all over the hospital, and all the nurses and doctors would talk about her unique power of regeneration. They would be as proud of her as Mr. Burgell in Blythe had been proud of his best blue-ribbon sow. She would become at home in the hospital and have all the fun you could have while waiting for three successive skin-grafting operations to turn out right. She would gossip with the nurses and embarrass the young interns by her unbeatable habit of being seductive—even in bandages. One of them would lose his head over her in spite of the new skin on her left shoulder that looked red and funny like a couple of wieners someone had accidentally forgotten there. And Pokey would make undelicate jokes about Marylynn employing on her elbow the very same vulgar piece of skin on which Pokey had used to sit. Luke would be nicer to her than ever before and never mind the way she looked. He would sit at her bedside, holding her hand and telling her gags and stories; he would trundle her around in the wheel chair and take her up to the roof, and he would kiss her the moment it was permitted again and in a way to make her feel that there was not a drop of pity in that kiss.

"You mean you still want me, Luke, the way I look?"

"Damn it all, woman, I'm afraid I do."

"How come?"

"To me your mug isn't quite as irritating now as when every moron couldn't help noticing how glorious you are."

Groping her way through the Bad Lands stretching between death and life, Marylynn knew every word of the conversations she would have with Luke and could feel all the future caresses and enjoy all the future quarrels which were a habit between them. Yes, Luke would be nice and she would almost fall in love with him. Almost, but not quite; for in sickness or health, awake or asleep, her instinct would remain on guard; an instinct that would never allow her to mistake gratitude for passion and that always kept warning her that Luke was not The One—just a passing stranger, alien to her own kind. "The instinct of the queen bee," Luke would tease her: "she doesn't mind gallivanting with a thick swarm of a few thousand unlucky males, but she will mate only with one—and love him to death, the poor guy."

In the hospital room there were the usual comings and goings while Marylynn was absorbed in designing a future of which she had such an uncannily clear conception. Dr. Bassington came twice, shook his head and went. Her blood pressure was taken, her temperature, her pulse; a few drops of water were dribbled into her through a little glass tube and made her sick as a dog. All this she had anticipated; but what was wrong and worried her was the absence of

Pokey. She needed Pokey very much, and Pokey knew it and Pokey would come to her and stand by her and be as wonderful as only Pokey could be. Without Pokey all the doctors in the world couldn't make her well again. She began to feel miserable and to moan softly, and Miss Cripps gave her a little hypo and wrote into the chart: "One o'clock—patient getting restless. $\frac{1}{4}$ grain morphine."

During the months it had taken Marylynn to recover completely from the ravages of the Cypress Grove fire she had developed a considerable tolerance for morphine, and the quarter grain was not enough to bring her relief. One by one her mind lined up the hardships through which she had passed after her release from the hospital more than four years ago. This was the more a torture as her mind was still too hazy to separate the past from the future; she was still stumbling through a no man's land where it appeared to her that every hurt and disappointment and every whipping that she had then received lay still ahead of her: she would leave the protecting walls of the hospital where she had been a prize case and would be delivered into a world where most people had whole faces. She would be afraid of them, and she would wrap a blue scarf around her cheeks and pull it down over her eyes. Pokey would hide her from reporters and photographers and agents. Only the closest friends would be permitted to see her, and they all would sing out much too emphatically that

nothing, but absolutely nothing, could be seen of the scars. Pokey would design a new hair-do which covered the slowly healing spot on the left temple and would claim that an evening dress with long sleeves but a deep slash in back and another in front was smarter and sexier than all the debutantes' strapless gowns. "Just wait a year and you'll be tops again; just half a year, just three months." Marylynn would look in the mirror and take heart; Pokey wouldn't let her slip during that period of waiting; she would make her take singing lessons, work on her enunciation, build up a new program, add a little Spanish to the French songs she knew. By and by Sid would start a publicity campaign to bring her back. Pokey was too shrewd to play upon the audiences' curiosity for a star who had gone through seven hells. What they wanted was Marylynn, undamaged and exactly as much fun as before. The Cypress Grove fire would be first minimized and then dropped entirely from the anecdotes Sid would launch into the papers.

Cheered and inspired and pushed on by Pokey, Marylynn would improve almost visibly from day to day. At long last she would feel that she was herself again, glistening with health and strength. "Trust our little salamander to grow a new tail in a hurry," Luke would remark. But then, just when she was full of self-assurance, ready to march triumphantly out and face an audience, there would be those cruel little setbacks. A little boy in Central Park clamber-

ing on her lap; touching her cheek and asking in his clear, high voice: "What's that funny thing you got there?" An old taxi driver inquiring solicitously: "Been in a bad accident, lady?" Young Pereira—who only a year ago had made a suicide attempt over her—writing passionate letters and flying up from Rio with the explicit intention of proposing marriage to her; turning a little white around the gills at her sight and, after an hour of strained conversation, flying back again without having proposed. . . .

Lying very flat and motionless on her hospital bed and strenuously bobbing up from the dark waters of unconsciousness, Marylynn had to struggle against obstacle after obstacle until she arrived at the small ultramodernistic platform of the Glass Tower.

Pokey had chosen the scene of her comeback with infinite care and thoughtfulness. The Glass Tower was a place with a lot of what Marylynn in her French moments called "*niveau*"; not too small, not too large, catering to the discriminating intellectuals and the society crowd of San Francisco. If things should go wrong—and Pokey had imbued Marylynn with the conviction that they simply couldn't—Broadway and the East Fifties didn't need to hear about it. On the other hand, if everything went as well as expected, Sid Carp was ready to blow a publicity trumpet that would have made the walls of Jericho come down. Altogether the four weeks at the Glass Tower were only meant as a tryout for the sub-

sequent engagement at the Star Roof. Luke had written new songs for her and kept her for weeks in a frenzy of work and happy anticipation; and Pokey, dear, strong, brave, reliable Pokey, had repeated over and over again that she sang better and looked better than ever before. New surroundings, a new program, a new hair-do, a magnificent new evening dress, and a fine new courage. No stage fright, none of the sneezing and stomach sickness and tight throat of a beginner. After so much idleness she could hardly wait for the moment of coming before an audience again, she was straining at the leash, she was as happy as a woman about to meet her lover from whom she had been separated too long.

The Glass Roof was on top of a skyscraper, all glass and metal and incandescent light. As they went up to it Marylynn wondered how such a small elevator should in an emergency take care of a large crowd, and there came a fleeting tightness around her heart which, however, passed while she arranged Emily in front of the mirror of her super-de-luxe dressing room. Flowers, telegrams, a shower of the small precious presents to which she had grown accustomed during the years of her sweet-tasting young success. Pokey popping a champagne cocktail into her mouth, fussing over her, spitting three times over her shoulder for good luck as always. And Luke "giving her the spurs," as he called it. This was a very important ritual and consisted of being taken into a dark corner

just before going in front of the crowd and being kissed until every nerve in her tingled. Perhaps it was this experienced and fervent embrace which made her walk onto the floor wrapped in an aura of sex that could be felt down to the last table.

While the Glass Tower was proud of Being Different, its backstage definitely was not. Pulled by Luke and pushed by Pokey, Marylynn made her way through the usual narrow corridors and concrete tubes, up a crooked little stairway and through the tunnel underneath the bandstand with its rubble of empty instrument cases, and her heart grew tight and fearful once more. "What's the matter?" Pokey asked, worried. You couldn't hide anything from Pokey, and whenever you tried, it backfired. "Nothing. Outov' breath," Marylynn said, stopping on her way. "For Chrissake! Don't give in. You can't let me down now," Pokey said in her toughest manner, and Marylynn felt sorry for her. Poor Pokey, she had aged beyond her years with all the worry about Marylynn. Not twenty-six yet, and already there was a streak of gray in her thick obstinate hair, her cheeks had grown a little hollow beneath the high cheekbones, and a sharp little crescent line was etched at the left corner of her mouth. It was the mark left by all the nursing, sitting up nights, fighting over insurance money, balancing the budget, paying the bills for all the intricate treatments that had restored Marylynn's beauty; suffering her own pains, cutting out her own

skin, selling her own jewelry, carrying her own load, without ever relaxing or complaining. Marylynn knew all this, although she was unable to put it into words. All she could say was: "It's your tough luck, Pokey. Why the hell did you team up with a born giver-inner and letter-downer like me?" At which Pokey would laugh a little, give her a slap on the rump and say, "Yes, why the hell did I?"

And so Marylynn took a deep breath and marched out onto the platform and into a clatter of applause as warm and friendly as a heavy summer rain. But both the Marylynn of the present who was lying with a sutured heart in a hospital bed and the Marylynn of the past who marched out onto the platform of the Glass Tower knew that they would let down Pokey all the same.

It would happen during the first chorus of the second song; Marylynn would faint, shamefully and disgracefully faint, in front of the audience, and there was nothing she could do about it. For while she sang she would realize that half the glass of the Glass Tower was made of cellophane and half of its metal splendor of combustible tinsel; she would be unable to concentrate, knowing only that she was trapped once more between the props of a make-believe which could be set aflame by one single careless match. Still singing, she would search for the lighted exit signs and would not find them behind the darkness and the smoke. Already she could taste that smoke; it filled

her mouth, it suffocated her. And no escape. Not in the too small elevator, not down the endless flight of stairs, not through the crooked tunnels backstage. She thought: I will fall twenty-two stories to the street and be dead.

Her heart was beating with frightened bat wings against a wall of pain, and then it stopped.

This was the eleventh day of the heat wave, and the early afternoon heat in the small anteroom of Number 35 was all but insupportable. Everyone's nerves were taut to the snapping point, even those of Lee Crenshaw, to whom nerves up to last night had been an unknown quantity. He had come out of the war with his calm and courage intact, but: "Brother," he confessed to Sid Carp, "Normandy was tough going, and I've been in pretty hot spots a few times since, but it was nothing like this." He had peeled off his tight blue coat, torn off his neat necktie, and rolled up his shirt sleeves, but his shirt stuck to his back with perspiration and revealed the constant tense play of his nice young muscles. Sid Carp, trying to entertain the fretting husband who had so unexpectedly fallen out of the sky, had pumped him for some details of his secret courtship and marriage which might be useful material for publicity. But Lee Crenshaw, amiable, open, and good-natured as he was otherwise, grew reticent on this point. "Publicity be hanged!" he told Sid. "I don't think Mrs. Cren-

shaw wants or needs any publicity, not ever again; not another word, not while I'm around! I don't want to hurt your feelings, brother. I understand that you've got to make a living, and so you've got to put all that hokum in the newspapers. But Mrs. Crenshaw hates publicity—she told me so, not one time but a hundred times.”

“She did, did she? Well, I humbly apologize if I have caused Mrs. Crenshaw any inconvenience,” Sid replied gravely.

“Sure, sure—but take, for instance, what happened when this Pokle woman found out that Mrs. Crenshaw likes flowers. Well, what nice girl doesn't? But here this Pokle woman knew Mrs. Crenshaw for years, called herself her best friend, and never found out that Mrs. Crenshaw would like to have a few pots of geranium on her window sill. So when she finds out at last, what happens? Does she buy her geranium pots? Not on your life! But she makes a big song and dance about it in the papers and has pictures taken with Mrs. Crenshaw staring at a calla lily as if she had never seen one before and this Pokle pestering the garden clubs to have some flower named after Marylynn. It's disgusting, that's what it is. Mrs. Crenshaw cried about it. ‘Can't I have a little privacy?’ she said to me. ‘Can't I have anything, not anything, that belongs to me alone and won't be broadcast all over the place?’ But never mind, now I'm here, and the moment she gets better I'll take her

to Taunton, where she'll have all the geraniums and all the privacy she wants."

The door opened and Luke came in, balancing a cluster of ice-cream cones in his huge hands. "There you are, kids," he said. "That's what we need. Take two, Lee, in this heat you can eat an iceberg and sweat it out within half an hour."

"Gee, Mr. Jordan," Lee said, grabbing a cone in each hand. "Gee, but that's nice of you."

"Any news about Marylynn while I was at the drugstore?" Luke asked in a tight voice.

Sid shook his head imperceptibly. "Lee was just telling me how he met Mrs. Crenshaw. He drove her all over Belgium in '44 when she went over on that U.S.O. tour, remember?"

"Well, go right on telling, Lee. Don't mind me, I'm reading." Luke made himself invisible behind a wall of magazines and papers; Crenshaw cleared his throat in the silence that followed. But he was so full of Marylynn, he had to talk about her or bust. In a way it was nothing but the same old nostalgic talk that had filled the barracks and hospitals, the Quonset huts and tents, the jungle encampments and desolate island outposts, the troop trains and transport ships, every hole and corner of the world where tired homesick soldiers had been dreaming out aloud about their women back home.

"You know how crazy the boys were about her, you were a soldier yourself, weren't you, Mr. Jordan?"

Boy, when we could catch her on the radio singing those nice old American songs it certainly was better than a letter from home! And when she came to us in person the boys went absolutely wild. Right away we knew: now there was a real pal! She wasn't playing up to the brass like most of the other girls, not Marylynn! She went right down to the G.I.'s, talking to them and having fun with them and eating with them—I bet you she made every man in my company think of his sweetheart, or his wife, or his little sister back home.”

Luke Jordan, who had watched the boy over the unread pages of his magazine, noticed with embarrassment and—yes—with something like envy that Lee had tears in his eyes. He put down the magazine, went over to the window, turning his back to the boy, so as not to be an onlooker to the other man's simple emotion. Look at the Native Corn, he thought, and then look at us: We, the intellectuals! We can write the songs that make them cry, but we can't cry ourselves. We have lost our innocence; what's left to us is the stringent aphorism and the melancholic joke. He still listened to the tale that went on behind his back.

“Naturally, I admired her just as much as the other guys did, maybe more so, because I saw more of her while I was driving her from one outfit to the other. You see, I'd got a slug in my shoulder and wasn't back on combat duty yet. I guess they gave me

that soft assignment like a kind of a candy bar because I had been a good boy. It made the other guys good and sore, and I had to take a lot of razzing. Naturally I couldn't help being crazy about Mary from the day I first laid eyes on her. But what really got me was the time we had trouble between Rochefort and Libremont—December 17th, 1944, that was; no time for camp shows, as you can imagine, and I had orders to get her back across the Meuse to 12th Army Group H.Q. at Verdun and out of harm's way as fast as I could. Maybe Mrs. Crenshaw wouldn't like me to tell you this, but that girl has more guts than many a soldier I've known. There wasn't much left of the Luftwaffe, but a few of their FW-190's came over and let go with everything they had. All I could do was drive my car in a ditch and pull Marylynn under it and dig us a sort of a slit trench through the snow and into that half-frozen ground. I suppose you know, Luke, how it is when you sweat it out in a foxhole with a buddy of yours—and that's what we were when we crawled out again: buddies. Just buddies. I guess before that day I had been a little afraid of her because she was such a celebrity and such a great star and all that. But after that half hour in that hole in the ground with me squatting on top of her and her making bad jokes underneath me so I shouldn't feel how she was trembling—well, after that I knew she was just a sweet scared little kid, for all her being brave and acting tough. Just a little girl who needed

a man to take care of her, and she let me know I was that man. I don't know if it ever hit one of you fellows like that—but I just knew: this is it. This one is the only one. So, when I'd got her safely to H.Q. and it came to saying good-by, I asked her 'When I come home from this war and I'm not a cripple, will you marry me?' and she said: 'If you come home and you don't have a leg left to dance with and no eyes to look into, and no arms to hold me tight, I'll marry you all the same, because you're all I ever want.'

Having said this, Lee Crenshaw blushed up to the furrows of his naïve corrugated forehead, blew his nose and added huskily, "You see, that's the sort of girl she is. But I'm talking too much. I'm sure Mrs. Crenshaw would be mad at me if she knew I told you. But a feller has to let off steam once in a while."

While Sid and Luke were trying to imagine this unimaginable Mrs. Crenshaw, there was a small commotion at the door, and a freshly starched nurse's aide ushered in Inspector Fowler, with the tired and disgruntled Dr. Bassington in his wake. "If you will wait here and have a little patience, Inspector," he said, "I'll see if the patient's condition permits a brief interview." Lee Crenshaw got up as though stung by a wasp, and the doctor added a perfunctory introduction, muttering the names of the three men. "Oh, I met the two gentlemen this morning," Fowler said politely. "Professionally," Luke added grimly, and Dr. Bassington disappeared into the sickroom. Cren-

shaw's face turned red with agitation. "You don't mean you're going to put my wife through the wringer?" he demanded. "You can ask me all the questions you want and I'll give you all the answers I can, but I'll be darned if I'll let you talk to Mrs. Crenshaw—and her not even being out of danger."

"That's all right; you don't have to worry, Mr. Crenshaw. You can rest assured that every precaution will be taken not to aggravate your wife's condition. We coppers too have some experience, don't you see? Doctors aren't the only people with good bedside manners."

"That may be so; but I'm telling you——" Crenshaw growled, and Fowler put a calming hand on the man's shoulder.

"We've got to have a clear case; we are just as eager as you must be to see the person punished who tried to kill your wife. I told you this morning that it's up to you to help us."

The blood ebbed out of Crenshaw's ruddy face and left it pale with rage. "If I could put my hands on that Pokle woman, she'd get her punishment, and I wouldn't need any of your red tape," he shouted, hammering a fifty-pound fist on the rickety table. Luke Jordan straightened up a bit while observing Crenshaw in his wrath, and his eyes became narrow and watchful. You have it easy, you primitive ones, he thought with the same curious envy as before. You love or you hate, you take an eye for an eye and

a tooth for a tooth and your world is black and white with a blob of very sweet, very pink, very soft raspberry ice cream in the center; that stands for love. No shades, no hues, no overtones. But all he said was: "Can't you read, Lee?" He pointed to the big sign on the wall: QUIET, PLEASE, and Lee Crenshaw shut his mouth in confusion.

The prick of a needle in her arm brought Marylynn to. "Now she's coming around," said Miss Cripps, putting the syringe on the tray. Dr. Bassington let go of Marylynn's wrist and bent close to her ear. The smell of soap and shaving lotion was the first thing Marylynn conceived with clarity ever since she had entered into the unexplained nightmare world of her soul's voyage.

"You are doing all right. You are a fine patient, Miss Marylynn," Dr. Bassington said. Marylynn took this to be a compliment and tried to smile at him. She liked the doctor; he was a nice man, and he used D'Orsay Lotion. Marylynn, who liked the species man and all the masculine smells connected with it—leather, cigarettes, rubbing alcohol, rain-damp tweeds, a prize fighter's sweat, the scent on a dance partner's hair—had recognized at once which brand this doctor was using. Her glance followed his lightly pompous figure as he walked out of the door. "Don't exert yourself, dear," said the monotonous little phonograph inside of Miss Cripps.

The veiled curtains around Marylynn's mind tore apart. But no—I don't have to go through this; the fire happened long ago, it's past and done with, she knew all of a sudden. But how, then, did the hospital fit into it?

"What happened to me?" she whispered miserably.

"Don't talk, dear; you must be quiet. You had a little operation."

Marylynn closed her eyes, and memories came tumbling down in a rush from all sides—some very clear now, and some still half understood and fraught with confusion.

Then a small breath of fresh air penetrated the sticky heat hovering about her bed; a faintly familiar fragrance of water sprayed delicately on rose petals, mixed with the very fine scent of an empty old tea caddy in which generations used to keep their most selected oolong. Even before Marylynn opened her eyes again she recognized the only rose that smelled like this. "Maggie Vandenholt!" she whispered. Miss Cripps threw an uneasy glance at her patient as she set down a huge glass bowl of long-stemmed roses. They were of a very pale creamy yellow, with a net of veins finely drawn in a flamingo blush. Marylynn smiled with her cracked parchment lips at the sight of them. "Maggie Vandenholt," she repeated; "look at A.W.!" At which Miss Cripps felt her pulse, took

the chart and wrote down skeptically: "1:35—patient slightly delirious."

But Marylynn was perfectly clear and correct in every detail. Maggie Vandenholt was a rose which Alan W. Huysmans had bred on his place in Long Island and given his mother's maiden name. Three dozen of these roses had been sent to her every morning during the weeks of his tenacious courtship. Early in the beginning of their acquaintance Marylynn had—at Pokey's orders—told the rich man: "Look here, A.W., the only gift I'll ever accept from you is flowers; but not flowers your secretary orders from the florist. Just flowers from your own garden—and it wouldn't do you any harm to go and pick them for me yourself." Thus Maggie Vandenholt had become one of several little tricks in convincing Alan W. Huysmans that he was loved, not for his power and money, but for himself. And here they were again—three dozen beautiful, pale, blushing, and selected Maggie Vandenholt's. Look at the Old Boy, Marylynn wondered, sending me roses! I'd expect him to send me rat poison. A moment later a small sharp fear knocked at the walls of her heart, which responded with a quick and terrible ache: Maybe I'm dying. Roses for my funeral. For even in her blurred condition Marylynn was sure that nothing short of her death could make A.W. relent after what she had done to him.

What had been just one of many weightless episodes in Marylynn's life, but almost a catastrophe in

that of Alan W. Huysmans, began when a plane was grounded at the airport of Fort Wayne during a blizzard night in December 1942. Sleet on the ground, fiercely driving snow in the black air, and the bunch of passengers, most of them important uniforms, had been tossed around by the storm for two extremely ugly hours. Marylynn had barely managed to keep herself on the brink of a disgraceful display of airsickness; she was cold all through, and her face felt green and puckered like a bunch of broccoli. Also, she felt very lonesome, for this was one of the rare occasions when she had traveled alone. While she had flown to California to the funeral of that forsaken aunt in Blythe, Pokey had remained in New York, hot on the scent of some contract. At that particular period of her life contracts for Marylynn were hard to get; for after that first fainting spell in San Francisco there had been others, failure after failure, every time she had to cope with the glitter out front and the backstage labyrinth of a night club. Fainting in front of an audience is an unforgivable sin; it made a nuisance of Marylynn. Managers and promoters soon showed her the cold shoulder, and there was a malignant rumor of her being jinxed. Funds were getting low, Pokey's furs and Marylynn's aquamarine necklace were put in hock with a certain S. Brill & Co. on upper Third Avenue. Pokey was left alone to fight their battle. Sid Carp, ridiculous in his uniform, was in Washington with some obscure unit of the

P.R.O. Worse luck, even Luke Jordan, transfigured into a soldier, had been shipped off, destination unknown. At times Marylynn was surprised how vast a vacuum he had left in their lives.

Yearning for company, she scanned the angry little group of passengers, didn't like any of them, and easily classified them as either drips or wolves. Disgusted, she sat down next to the only man who had not tried to make some clumsy advances. He had gray hair, held the inevitable portfolio on his lap, and there was something solid and trustworthy about him, although he looked disgruntled and quite sick himself.

"If your tummy is bouncing like mine, what you want is a good, thick, sizzling steak to hold it down. And a cup of strong coffee," Marylynn remarked with all the cheer she could muster. The old gentleman seemed startled as he looked up from a little timetable he had been studying. "Beg your pardon? Er—yes—indeed," he answered at last. "Well, why don't we drive into town and find us some place that's still open?" Marylynn suggested companionably. At this he gave her a quick glance so full of distrust and cold withdrawal that it made Marylynn laugh. In general, this was not the sort of response she set off in men. She felt a little sorry for this old boy who seemed so unused to a little friendliness that he didn't know how to accept it (and in all the following months she never stopped feeling sorry for the great

Alan W. Huysmans). "I didn't mean to shock you," she said, "but I simply have to get something into my stomach, and I just can't go around in a strange town in the middle of this Godforsaken night and look for a joint that might give me something to eat. Besides, you look as if a drink and a bite wouldn't do you any harm either. So-o, I'd appreciate it no end if you'd be my escort. Sir," she added as an afterthought.

A.W. looked her over with the precise scrutiny of a man who in his youth had won his spurs as a reporter on his father's newspapers. She was young, lovely, and, as far as appearances went, every inch a lady. No perfume but a good eau de cologne; hardly any make-up, but a high-class outdoor skin in full bloom. A simple but well-cut gray flannel dress under a ditto beaver coat. None of the vulgar mink and silver fox the wives and mistresses of his two no-good sons were flouncing into your face. As she took off her severe little gray hat a pleasantly natural-looking waterfall of blond hair came cascading down to her shoulders.

"I should be honored," Alan W. Huysmans said, "but unfortunately the airline bus which was to take us to town got stalled in the blizzard. I tried to hire a car, but there is not a chauffeur in town who wants to take chances. I'm afraid we'll have to spend the night on this most uncomfortable bench, and as long as we can't drive to the depot and catch a train we'll be stranded here until the weather clears up."

"Well, we'll see about that," Marylynn said and left him.

He looked after her and thought of his mother, who always claimed that the young flibbertigibbets of today didn't know how to walk. It seemed to him that here was one young woman who did. Ten minutes later she returned to him, announcing merrily: "It's all fixed. I talked one of the young pilots into giving us a ride into town in one of the airline cars—but, don't you see, you've simply got to come along? If I drive off alone with the boy he'd feel obliged to make passes at me—and if there's one thing I hate it's a wrestling match in a car." The Old Boy cleared his throat; "Yes, I suppose a young lady as—er—charming as you are will have her troubles keeping men in their places," he said with a tortured smile, trying to synchronize himself to the sound and rhythm of the younger generation; he didn't know how pitifully stiff and old-fashioned the little compliment sounded.

From the moment Marylynn took charge of Huysmans the dismal night turned into sheer delight for him. By handling audiences Marylynn had learned to handle all sorts of people with great ease and gusto. She told the Old Boy some of her little gags, she clowned and mimicked for him, she teased him a bit and flattered him a bit and patted his hand; and when he spread his travel rug over her knees she insisted that he share it with her. With the help of the

young pilot she also found the one and only place in town that would serve them a good steak at this time of the night; Charlie's was a disreputable-looking little café at the outskirts of the town, noisy, smoky, crowded and overheated, yet deliciously cozy after the bumpy flight because so firmly and steadily anchored to the ground. The Old Boy hesitated in the door, with the snow blowing in after him, but Marylynn, scrutinizing the people along the counter with the experienced eyes of a former waitress, was more than satisfied. Truck drivers stopping on their overland route; mechanics from an open-all-night garage; a cop interrupting his beat for a cup of coffee; a bunch of defense workers, on their way home from swing shift, crowding around the pinball machines.

Gingerly Huysmans waded into this little sample of a democracy on which he editorialized a lot but knew very little. Marylynn installed him in one of the four booths and marched into the kitchen to coax the cook into some extra effort; for Marylynn, who was always so strictly taken care of by Pokey, loved to take care of people herself, and Emily was but a poor substitute on whom to practice these frustrated instincts. But the Old Boy began to melt, to blossom out, to unfold timid little buds of friendliness which sprouted unexpectedly from his locked-up self. Not that he was capable of stepping altogether out of his stainless steel tower or vaulting across the bars of prejudice

and precaution behind which he kept himself imprisoned. "My name is Smith," he said officiously after raising his glass to her. Marylynn had trouble not to laugh out loud. "But how remarkable, Mr. Smith!" she informed him gravely. "My name also is Smith."

She felt warm and well fed, safe and gay and happy in contrast to the miserable two hours of flying through the blizzard. Her mood spilled over onto Alan W. Huysmans. He couldn't remember ever having spent a more agreeable time in more pleasant company. His knowledge of women was limited and mostly theoretical. He adored his mother, he had honored and respected his wife, he despised his daughters-in-law, and he had nothing but contempt for the coarse occasional affairs which his doctor, his secretary, and even his old mother recommended to him since he was a widower. Of his non-marital contacts he remembered only a night with a French girl during the first world war. For some reason, and in spite of being an entirely different type, Marylynn reminded him of that warm-blooded little wench in Rouen. By now every masculine and protective instinct in him had been called on the alert. Tingling all over, he went into action, and Marylynn watched with satisfaction although without surprise the transformation the Old Boy underwent before her very eyes. It never failed to work. A few little compliments, a little appeal to their strength and superiority,

and men, the poor darlings, pushed out their chests and went off like rockets—especially if you wore nylons and shoes size $4\frac{1}{2}$.

Alan W. Huysmans retired into the telephone booth and made a few long-distance calls, at the end of which he had all the weather reports; he knew that all planes would be grounded for at least six hours, he had by hook and crook secured an empty compartment on the train passing through at 4:28 A.M.; he had told his secretary in New York to postpone the Monday-morning conference and ordered his chauffeur Wallace to meet him at the train at Grand Central Station. He even had a brave taxi waiting outside, and this time he stuck his thrilled knees next to hers under the robe without waiting for an invitation. The blizzard showed signs of getting tired, and Marylynn was yawning, unabashed as a child. When she found, on boarding the train, that two beds were neatly made up in one compartment, she raised a quizzical eyebrow and thought: Too bad! The porter stood by with his ivory grin, ready to accept a millionaire's tip. "Everything okay, Mr. Huysmans?" he asked happily. Marylynn caught the well-known name, connected it with the equally well-known gray pompadour, and suppressed a street urchin's knowing whistle. Instead, she managed to look ever so slightly offended in a restrained and most ladylike way. The Old Boy stammered, explained, and apologized in desperation. Worn out as he was, he made

the hasty and quixotic gesture of offering to spend the night on the leather bench in the men's wash-room and leave the precious compartment entirely to her. At that Marylynn felt another upsurge of pity. "Wouldn't it be simpler if each of us would curl up in his corner and get a few hours' sleep? I promise I won't bite you, Mr. Smith," she said. Alan W. accepted with enormous gratitude, although not without the precaution of leaving the door to the corridor open. Marylynn kicked off her shoes, pulled the blanket up to her chin, gave a huge yawn and sigh like a puppy in front of the fireplace, and fell blissfully asleep. Alan W. Huysmans, however, kept awake for another hour while taking his eyes and thoughts for a promenade over the face and the body of that lovely creature the blizzard had blown into his way; and he was surprised to feel that he had to keep his eyes and thoughts on a leash or they would have run away with him.

"Guess whom I met on the trip," Marylynn reported on Monday to Pokey. "That Old Boy, Alan W. Huysmans."

"The old buzzard?" said Pokey, whose political opinions didn't agree with the editorials of the Huysmans papers. "He must be a disgusting specimen."

"Oh no. He's nice. I like him," said Marylynn.

While Alan W. Huysmans was still flushed with the afterglow of his delightful encounter, he did what

to him was the most natural first step in any human relation: he asked his secretary, Don Myrtle, to obtain a dossier of the young lady who facetiously had called herself Mary Smith and had readily given him her telephone number. The same evening, that was Monday, the dossier was in his hands, and he absorbed its contents with mixed feelings.

There was a sour-sweet taste, mixed of disillusion and relief, to the information obtained: a night-club singer, with many amours to her reputation; well managed, apparently, but nevertheless without a job; in rather strained financial circumstances although keeping up appearances. Not married, not divorced, and, at present, seemingly unattached. Altogether an object so easily to be approached that it almost wasn't worth the effort. And yet, that young creature had been so warm and simple, so very trusting and yet reserved, so irresistibly lovable. Huysmans tried what other men before had tried in vain: he tried to get Marylynn out of his mind and found that it was impossible.

On Tuesday he called her up, on Wednesday he sent her flowers, on Friday he asked her out for dinner. "Tonight? But it's impossible tonight—I have a nasty little engagement which I can't cancel. Oh, I'm so disappointed," she said, and it sounded so sincere that it sent a little tremor through Huysmans' heavy body. He spent the week end at his mother's place near North Haven and wrestled with the temptation

of sending Marylynn a long, compromisingly amorous wire.

Marylynn's regret had indeed been sincere. That night Pokey had arranged for her to be a guest in the intimate little floor show of the Tricolore, Candescu's latest enterprise. Her appearance on the program was nicely staged as an absolute improvisation, a surprise for the Tricolore's spoiled and blasé rich French refugee audience; Marylynn was to be discovered as a guest among other guests, sitting with two suave young men at a ringside table. There was the emcee's joyful amazement at discovering her among the crowd, the spotlight turned upon her, the people looking at her, the emcee's pleading and wheedling for Marylynn, *la superbe incomparable* Marylynn, to step up to the mike and give them just one of her songs, *seulement une petite, petite, toute petite chanson*. There was the applause, the pleased whispering, the little comedy of Marylynn smiling, bowing, first declining and—*enfin!*—letting herself be dragged onto the floor. All the preparations were perfectly designed and executed—a desperate last trick of Poker's to bring Marylynn back before an audience without tearing her through the purgatory of waiting backstage. But the little scheme came off a dud. Marylynn had lost her grip, she sang curiously listlessly, and there was no Luke Jordan to "give her the spurs." Her little song fell down in itself, like a carelessly handled cheese soufflé.

"There you are—even our old friend Candescu has washed his hands of us; well, kid, we'd better face it; we're through on Broadway," Poker told her bluntly, after which she made a sharp turn and marched rigidly into the bathroom, where she locked herself in for the next half hour.

"What are you doing in there so long?" Marylynn called after ten minutes.

"I give you three guesses," Pokey growled from inside.

"You're not bawling, are you?"

"Oh, go to hell, leave me alone," Pokey answered, and Marylynn slunk away, feeling terribly guilty and utterly bankrupt.

Pokey always claimed that she had her best inspirations while simmering in a very hot bath; by the time she emerged from the steaming bathroom she had regrouped her forces, opened another front, and developed a new strategic plan. "What about that Old Boy Huysmans?" she asked. "Did you discourage him completely or will he call up again?"

"You bet I did, and you bet he will," Marylynn answered with the simple self-assurance of a victorious blonde.

Three weeks after Fort Wayne, Huysmans succeeded at last in taking Marylynn out for dinner. By that time he felt as if he couldn't bear waiting for another hour; he also felt that he had spent much

too much time and thought already on the pursuit of this little fly-by-night. But he was ill advised when he approached her via the usual route. As the maître d'hôtel lit the perishable little blue flame of their crêpes Suzette, Huysmans judged it the opportune moment for pushing a discreet flat little parcel into Marylynn's hand. "A little souvenir of our second dinner together, which, I hope, won't be the last," he whispered, his slightly trembling knee searching for hers under the table as if they were still sharing the same travel rug. . . .

Marylynn came home before midnight, and Pokey gave a little sigh of relief when she heard the key in the door latch. "Well, how was it? Did you have a good time?" she called over the banister. Marylynn came trudging up the stairs, dragging her fur coat after her and kicking her shoes off as soon as she reached the upper landing. "Could've been worse," she said. "But you know me. I just don't like prancing into the Colony and being stared at on my evening off, and why do they always think they've got to feed you crêpes Suzette before trying to make you? I just don't care for crêpes Suzette, period. If you ask me, it was much nicer at Charlie's in Fort Wayne. But the Old Boy is a darling. I was sorry for him."

"What would make you sorry for the great Alan W. Huysmans?"

"Oh, I don't know—if the biggest lion in the zoo wanted to lick your hand and was afraid of it, you'd

be sorry for him too, wouldn't you? Now I want a glass of milk."

When Pokey came back from the icebox, Marylynn was comfortably wrapped in her pink negligee with the pink marabou trimming and in the process of putting Emily to bed. "So Mr. Huysmans tried to seduce you, did he?" Pokey dropped as an aside.

"I wonder where he got his line? From the cartoons in *Esquire*, maybe. You should have seen how funny he was when he came out with his little diamond bracelet. The one with the small emerald in the center, you've seen it in the Tiffany ad, two thousand four hundred and ninety—special Xmas buy." She threw herself on her bed, flexed her legs in the air, and then brought one of her feet close to her eyes for a serious contemplation of the new shade of her nail lacquer. "Two thousand five hundred dollars! You know what? That would be a lot of money if a little guy had saved it up for me. But to Huysmans it's nothing. And if the great A.W. thinks he can buy me over the bargain counter he is very much mistaken."

Pokey did not ask any questions; she knew that the best way of finding out whatever she wanted to know about Marylynn was by letting her go on with her little monologues. By now she was drinking her milk in long deep gulps; it made her suddenly look very young and vulnerable. "I could have laughed into

his face," she went on, handing the glass back to Pokey. "But I was very tactful. Very."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I told him that he was a darling and that I was very much touched, but that it wasn't my birthday and that I was funny that way; if I wanted jewelry I always bought it myself, and that's a principle. Poor A.W., he looked like a little boy whose kite had gone off. He was sitting there with his little bracelet and didn't know what to do with it. I told him it would still make a nice Christmas present for one of his daughters-in-law."

"I wouldn't call that so terribly tactful, would you?" Pokey said. Alan W. Huysmans' two philandering sons, their love affairs, misalliances, divorces, and entanglements in various scandals were a perpetual source of material for the gossip columns, and the whole country knew or guessed the contempt of the iron Old Man for his flabby offspring.

"Well, he's a tough old guy, and it's better to show him from the beginning that I'm not a cinch either. You told me so yourself, didn't you?" Marylynn went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Pokey followed her and sat down on the edge of the bathtub.

"Still, two thousand five hundred dollars' worth of diamonds is nothing to be sneezed at," she mused worriedly. "Brill's might have given me eight, nine hundred dollars for it; there are bills to be paid, you know." Marylynn gargled, spat, and gave her a mis-

chievous little side glance. "I'm not balancing the budget; you are. Right? And I acted under your instructions. Right?"

"Right," said Pokey; she got up from the bathtub and trotted behind Marylynn into the bedroom. "If Mr. Huysmans wants anything from you, he can't have it for a diamond bracelet. He'll have to marry you," she said with finality. Marylynn gave no answer to this, but as Pokey bent down to tuck her into bed she asked—and there was no apparent connection between Pokey's last statement and her question: "No news from Luke yet?" Pokey went to the window and scrutinized the dim-out blind; she remained standing there, not looking at Marylynn as she answered: "Ah, yes—I almost forgot to tell you; there was a cable from Calcutta, Western Union phoned it through; but it was all garbled. Seems he's in a hospital with some sort of an infection—malaria or something. Nothing serious. I told them to send us the cable."

"How could he catch malaria? You don't get malaria by just playing the piano in officers' clubs," Marylynn said, disguising her worry as anger.

"Maybe he was stung by an unmusical mosquito," Pokey said and went to the door.

"Pokey, listen," said Marylynn, and Pokey came quickly back to her: "Yes, kid?"

"Aw, it's nothing. Just—do you really think a man like Huysmans would marry me?"

"Why shouldn't he? If we handle this right——"

"Yeah, sure. Well, good night, Pokey."

There was something in the tone of her voice that made Bess quickly sit down on her bed and take Marylynn's head between her hands like a beautiful but perishable fruit. "Look here, kid, I'm not pushing you into anything. That's understood, isn't it? I only thought that as long as we seem to be washed out on Broadway, marrying Mr. Huysmans would be the best thing that could happen to us. But if you don't want to, you never have to see the Old Boy again."

"I know that. But I do like him. You think he's a bastard and a nasty son of a bitch on account you don't like his newspapers. But you don't know him as I do. He really is nice."

Bess shrugged impatient shoulders at Marylynn's indiscriminate tolerance for anything male. "That's all right, Mary. I can see your point. But we were talking about marrying Mr. Huysmans, and that's something different again."

"We're pretty hard up, aren't we, Pokey?" Marylynn asked quietly, and Bess wondered how much Marylynn might understand of their fairly desperate situation. Yes, we are very hard up, she thought; but being Bess Poker, she didn't say it. A hasty flight of bitter speculations passed through her mind and left it curiously depleted. It's easy to get a job now; I could make seventy, even eighty dollars a week. We'd have to sublet the house, find us a cheap apartment.

Maybe Marylynn could work in defense. Would be swell publicity. Or I could marry Mr. Brill. For a change it's me who had a proposal. "With your kepefele in my business we could make good money, how about it, Miss Poker? I don't look like Clark Gable, except for my ears, but I'd make a good family man." She could see it all: another office, another typewriter, another cash register. Three rooms in the Bronx, with Mr. Brill in slippers and shirt sleeves thrown in for better measurement. Perhaps one could develop Brill & Co., open an auction hall, attract a better clientele. In any case it would mean scraping, saving, going back to the small life of small people. There were various prospects, and all of them unbearable. Away back in the past Bess Poker could hear herself: "When I'm rich I'll splash hundred-watt bulbs all over the place!" She gave Marylynn's temples a last reassuring little squeeze before she tightly clasped her hands in her lap. "Never mind, Mary, we're not that hard up yet. Besides, I'm definitely against human sacrifice. We'll never be so hard up that you'd have to go after Old Man Huysmans if you don't feel like it."

Marylynn sat up with an unusual show of initiative. "Who's talking about sacrifice? I'd *like* to get married. If there's one thing I'm sure about, it's that I want to get married. I'd like to have a family of my own. I never had. I'd like to have a place of my

own and know where I belong. I'd ten times rather be married than peddle myself on Broadway."

"Don't kid yourself—you are just feeling that way because you've had a few tough breaks. But you're only your real self the moment a spotlight is thrown on you. All you need is another success—Lord, I'd give my right hand if I could get it for you."

"Sure, I love it. I love riding on a roller coaster too. Up she goes and down she goes and you're scared every second of it and you never know what's coming behind the next curve and the end is always that I'm sick to my stomach. What do you know about me? Not even as much as I do, and that's darn little. I'm not kidding myself. All I've got is my looks and a bit of a voice and I've got to worry about it day and night and how long will it last anyway? Sure, I'd like to get married. Every girl does. Just get married, and relax and snuggle up to someone and be comfortable——"

Bess Poker looked absent-mindedly at Marylynn, who obviously pictured marital life as an institution akin to her habit of kicking off her shoes and slumping around in a pink negligee. "If you married Huysmans, you'd be one of the richest women of the world," she said, preoccupied, and this was the last link in a long chain of thoughts.

"That's a funny thing for you to say—and you and Luke always sounding off about the Idle Rich and

the Rights of the Common Man. Personally, I wouldn't care for being so terribly rich. Fact is that's the one thing that scares me a bit about A.W. If I want to be nice to him I always have to make myself forget his money. But he does make me feel comfortable and I like to do little things for him; he's such a lonely poor old fish."

"Don't try to tell me that you'd marry Alan W. Huysmans for love," Poker said irritably. And Luke sick in India, eating his heart out for you, she thought—but this was one of the things she did not say.

"Love, love—I'm sick and tired hearing and singing about it. Really, Pokey, you're so clever and intelligent and you do have a college education, but in these things you're awfully dumb. After four years on Broadway you don't expect me to sit and wait for a Prince Charming? How often have you seen me fall in and out of love? If I get married I want to start with something less wobbly than love." She made an ineffectual attempt at looking hard-boiled, and for a fleeting moment there was a sadness in her eyes, the more touching as it was so rare. As if she had sent her dreams out to some horizons beyond those she could reach and touch, and as if all her dreams had come back, empty-handed. "I'm sure I could be quite happy with the Old Boy; and I think I'd make him a good wife," she concluded with a queer humility.

"You don't realize how exciting life could be for us if he married you," Pokey said. She too had dreamed

a bit during the short silence. "Why, the whole world would be thrown open for us; you'd be the best-dressed, most-talked-of woman in the United States. We could travel—meet anyone we want. No more playing up to every little jerk who manages a night club; we'd show them, wouldn't we? Why, Marylynn, there isn't a famous artist or scientist or diplomat on earth who wouldn't come running when Mrs. Huysmans invited him. If he married you there's nothing you couldn't ask for."

Marylynn remained cool at the prospect of having Noel Coward, Einstein, and Chiang Kai-shek for dinner. "What a show, *hein*, Pokey? What a super-production!" she said good-naturedly, with a rare flash of insight into the workings of her friend's mind. "Not quite as good as making a hit on Broadway, but almost—is that it?"

"No, that's not it," Bess went on, getting more and more excited. "But just think of the good we could do by taking the Old Boy in our hands. Make him see the other side, pound some sense and some consideration and some human understanding into his stubborn skull. So much power in one hand—and so much abuse! Mary, I'm telling you, if you could make him see the light and change the tune of his papers, it would be the greatest service anyone could do this country. . . ."

Marylynn watched her with a trace of amusement; it always tickled her sense of humor when Pokey went

off into the stratosphere like this. "Ambitious, aren't you?" she said. "And all I want is a husband."

Uncalled for, a line bobbed up in Poker's mind, an echo so loud and clear that she could hear it spoken: "Only vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself and falls on the other." *Macbeth*, Hunter's College, English 2, Professor Cecil Spencer; "Elizabeth Poker, one of our most promising students." Then her father had died, and they had put 25-watt bulbs into all the sockets. . . . She gave Marylynn a little pat and got up. "All right, kid, don't worry. If it's a husband you want, we'll see that you get one," she said lightly as she left the room.

That was their side of the story. From Huysmans' vantage point it looked quite different. He knew the game and he knew the stake, and every design and ruse and move which Pokey might have planned he anticipated and countered. This time—so it seemed to Bess Poker—they had to reverse their roles. This was not a question of her borrowing Marylynn's luscious façade to reach the goal she had set for both of them. This time she tried passionately to create a Marylynn who would still look the same but become a Bess Poker in personality, education, and family history. While she was still busily constructing a respectable past and background for Marylynn, reshaping her into the sort of poor but genteel young woman a Huysmans might marry if he couldn't get her otherwise, the Old Man

had snooped into every shady nook and corner of Marylynn's life; and there was not a taxi ride to some roadhouse and not a date with some headwaiter which had been necessary at the very beginning of her career of which he wasn't informed. The disturbing fact was, however, that the more he knew about her, the less he could seem to be able to live without her, ever again. For a lonesome, feared, and well-hated man of his age there exists nothing as precious as the excitement, the vibrant expectation, the prickling, the tingling, the imperative wanting, as he experienced it for the first time through Marylynn. There came a day when he realized with a great shock that this was what people called Being Happy; that, then, he had never been happy before and that Marylynn was the only person on earth who could make him happy.

From that realization he stumbled on to the next question: and why not be happy? If Marylynn absolutely wanted to be married, why not do her the favor and marry her? He looked around and found a world which, in spite of war and hardship and tragedy, was populated by an astounding number of people who knew how to be happy. A wave of meeting, marrying, mating, and begetting seemed to sweep the globe in that spring of 1943. Each rainworm, blind, deaf, and bisexual as he had the misfortune to be created, found his mate. Why, then, should an Alan W. Huysmans remain alone and aloof in his cold vacuum

of influence and power? The people? What did he care about the people and their opinion about him! The difference of age? But he had never been as young as in these weeks of wanting Marylynn. His family, his sons? The thought of his sons was the final small sting of the spur that sent Huysmans off in a brisk canter. They were good-for-nothings who had never stopped for a moment to consider him when it came to plucking a little wayside pleasure or satisfying one of their easy appetites. If he married Marylynn he could have sons again, better sons, conceived in the communion of his passion with her youth and gifted with their mother's beauty and their father's strength.

But when he had wildly galloped so far as to picture the little night-club singer as the mother of future Huysmans, he bridled and balked and stopped for an hour of sober analysis. The next time he met Marylynn he cleared his throat, he felt his scalp contract under his graying pompadour, and he asked her squarely whether she liked children and whether she ever wanted some of her own. Marylynn responded with an enthusiasm so obviously genuine that it thrilled Huysmans to the marrow of his bones. There was nothing of the flippant shilly-shallying he had heard from his daughters-in-law. She didn't say that babies ruined your figure or that she was young and wanted to enjoy her life unencumbered, or that you couldn't ride in the Grand National Horse Show

while you were with child. On the contrary, Marylynn had very definite plans and seemed to look forward to a bountiful offspring. "What I'd like best are two of each kind. Two little boys and two little girls and never more than two years between them, might as well be twins. I'm half of a twin myself, it runs in the family. My little twin sister died when she was six weeks old, Emily she was called. I've missed her ever since. Well, at that time people didn't know much about the care and feeding of babies. It wouldn't happen to my little twins, I promise you. I'd like to have the little baby girls first because they'd want to mother the little boys. I know how I felt when I was a little girl. I've always been crazy about babies. But I wouldn't like to have them in New York; I'm always sorry for the little tykes—all they've got is Central Park, or just the street and the sand lot down the block. . . ."

The little monologue opened wide, glad vistas before Alan W. Huysmans. "Marylynn, you don't know how adorable you are," he said, completely carried away.

In all the world there was but one person who had absolute authority over Alan W. Huysmans, and that was his mother. There was hardly a day when he missed seeing her. Like a dog retrieving the same chewed-up ball with undiminishing pleasure, he brought to her day after day the same dull little report about his health and the same pointless remarks



about the weather. Nevertheless he was certain—and justly so—that the old lady was the only person who really knew him. Theirs were the commonplace conversations of two people so close to each other that no words or confessions were needed between them.

“If you don’t mind, Mother, I’d like to bring a guest to the Grange next week end. It’s the young lady whom I squired around recently quite a bit, I think I told you about her,” he said shortly after Easter.

“What was her name again?” asked the old lady, whose brain was like a worn-out strainer, very fine in places but with big holes in others.

“Lynn, Mary Lynn. I told you about her.”

“One of the Springfield Lynns?” the old lady asked, fishing the surname of a long-extinct Massachusetts family out of the deep, bottomless bag of her memories.

“No, I don’t think so. In fact, I doubt that there is any family worth speaking of. But I hope you will find Mary good company nevertheless.”

“Of course, my boy. I’ll be delighted to meet her,” said old Mrs. Huysmans. And without another word it was understood that Alan carried himself with the idea of marrying again, and this time outside of his prescribed circle, but that he would leave the final decision to the judgment of his mother.

And so Marylynn appeared on the Grange, the estate near North Haven where old Mrs. Huysmans

spent every spring. She came dressed in the most correct tweeds, watching her language, changing for dinner into the most restrained of all semiformal, and wearing no jewelry save an old-fashioned locket containing the miniature of somebody's mother (loan by courtesy of S. Brill & Co.). She was chaperoned by her companion and childhood friend, Miss Elizabeth Poker, who at appropriate moments dropped little fragments of Mary's newly manufactured biography into the old lady's hearing apparatus. Poor Pokey, she could have saved herself all the worry and effort, for Marylynn could never be anything but herself for any length of time—and from the moment she began to behave naturally the old lady warmed up to her in an amazing fashion.

"Alan, why don't you show Miss Poker your stamp collection while I have a little chat with this child in front of the fireplace?" she said immediately after dinner, and Huysmans took Poker obediently into his den for an hour of extreme boredom. This colorless Miss Poker was a nuisance who reminded him of his watchdog of a she-secretary under whose loyalty he had suffered before acquiring the services of the spinsterish but indifferent Don Myrtle. He hated Poker from the first moment. The dislike was mutual.

"What a dump!" Poker said as she and Marylynn began undressing in their frugal Early American guest rooms. "You'd think rich people would have the sense to get some modern heating into their place.

You'll have to change a lot around here if Mr. Huysmans condescends to make you his wife. How did you get on with the old family skeleton?"

"Oh, swell," said Marylynn. "She's a peach. I love old people, the older the better, don't you?"

"It depends. She strikes me as if she had been put on ice sixty years ago and never got unfrozen since."

"Oh, you just brushed her the wrong way. She likes having fun just like you and me. I told her some of Luke's juicier jokes and kept her glass of port filled and you should have seen the old girl. Busting at the seams with laughter! A.W. had a hard time getting her to bed at all."

Old Mrs. Huysmans in her four-poster was at that moment still chuckling to herself about some of the risqué stories Marylynn had told her. "You were darn right, my boy, when you said that Mary would be good company," she told her son, who came to say good night—a rite as formal and unchangeable as a Catholic High Mass. "I hope Miss Lynn didn't exert you too much, Mother," Huysmans said, slightly worried by the flushed cheeks and gleaming eyes of the old lady. It always troubled him when his mother had what he called her Maggie Vandenholt face. In some ways it seemed not quite correct for a lady of almost ninety to resemble at moments the portrait painted of her as a bride. "I suppose Miss Lynn is a type that's new to you; rather emancipated," he remarked cautiously.

"Emancipated—fiddle-faddle!" It was Mrs. Huysmans' expression for anything non-essential—and at her age there are very few things left which still seem essential. "The young woman has a pleasant appearance, a good sense of humor, and the most agreeable voice I've heard in a long time."

"I'm glad you think so, Mother," Huysmans said. He was relieved to hear his mother call Marylynn a Young Woman: it implied the old lady's realization of Marylynn's non-virginal status and cut out further discussions of this worrisome point. As for the agreeable voice, Huysmans did not know that he had to thank Luke Jordan for it, and how many years of coaching and pounding and beating it had cost. Like all deaf people, Mrs. Huysmans loathed being yelled at; and it so happened that Marylynn was the only person who did not shout into her hearing aid but spoke to her with the professional ease and clear enunciation with which she was used to throwing her voice into the farthest corner of a night club.

This was one reason for her instantaneous hit with this new audience consisting of one very old, almost petrified but very bright New England relic.

The other reason had to do with a salmon-colored azalea called Chinook Beauty and with the manpower shortage.

The manpower shortage had left the Grange with a very diminished staff of gardeners, and Chinook Beauty had fallen very ill. Marylynn discovered the

sick-looking clump of azaleas with a little cry of distress and expertly set to work at once. Alan W. Huysmans, leading his mother down the Beech Walk, found Marylynn kneeling among the ailing plants, still in her Sunday-morning church dress and hat, but smeared with soil and dirt up to the tip of her nose. "The poor, poor darlings with their cold little feet!" she cried in great commotion. "Look what they have done to them! No drainage, and the water pipe over there leaking all the time. The ground is soaked, and whoever shoved the soil so high up their neck doesn't know the first thing about planting azaleas. Where do you keep your mulch, A.W.? I'll take care of them, don't you worry, ma'am; all I need is some peat moss—and I'd give them some tea leaves, too; I just don't believe in those artificial acids you buy at the hardware store, do you, Mrs. Huysmans?"

In all innocence Marylynn had hit the bull's-eye. "How right you are, darling!" Huysmans said agitatedly. "We'll have to talk to Ohmsted at once, Mother. This is inexcusable. But, darling, I never dreamed that you were interested in gardening."

Neither did I, thought Bess Poker. She stood by, very superfluous, struck speechless by the discovery of new continents in Marylynn of whose existence she had never had the slightest inkling. It was the first time that the great Huysmans had addressed Marylynn as darling, and it had come out with great spon-

taneity. Bess Poker felt very silly; she, with all her faked family history and her fabricated anecdotes about Marylynn's non-existent grandfather who had been a sea captain and her French-Canadian grandmother whose ancestors had settled in Quebec in 1682, while Marylynn only needed to be herself to conquer even such a venerable exhibit of old bones as Mrs. Huysmans! For now old Mrs. Huysmans, who had been a lover of flowers and a fine gardener all her life, let herself down onto the wet ground as if she were still seventy, muttering humble apologies about the disgraceful condition of Chinook Beauty and making the regrettable lack of garden help responsible for it. At once she and Marylynn were involved in a serious and eager conference about the advantages of steer manure and garden compost as compared to these newfangled commercial fertilizers; and for the rest of the afternoon the two of them locked themselves away in a fertile heaven full of manure, seed catalogues, lawn mixtures, and enterprising plans about planting a new herbaceous border around the cut-flower beds; all of this climaxing in their joint and feverish ambitions for the Westport Garden Society's Flower Show in June.

"Your Mary is a fine woman. A very fine woman," Mrs. Huysmans declared the same evening at the height of the good-night ceremony. "And, Alan, I won't hear of any fiddle-faddle about her back-

ground. She has the marks of a thoroughbred, and if she will take you, my boy, you can consider yourself lucky indeed."

"I do, Mother, I do," Huysmans murmured in an explosion of grateful relief as he placed a thin, careful good-night kiss upon the gray hairpiece which his mother never removed before he had left the room.

"You may ask her, if it would not bore her too much, to stay with me on the Grange until after the Flower Show," Mrs. Huysmans concluded. "She offered to help Ohmsted with the roses, and I'm certain that she has green thumbs. The dogs have taken quite a fancy to her, too, and I'm not surprised."

"Thank you, Mother; I'm certain Mary will be more than pleased to accept your invitation," Huysmans replied.

The Flower Show of the Westport Garden Society opened on June 8. Maggie Vandenholt received second prize for tea roses—and a week later several thousand engraved cards were sent out, in which Mrs. Margaret Huysmans took the pleasure of announcing that her son, Alan W., was engaged to be married to Miss Mary Lynn, of Blythe, California.

For all the trouble the Old Boy made for Marylynn later on when she broke that engagement, she retained a grateful memory of the pleasant months she spent as his fiancée. The flowers and the dogs of the Grange, birds in the treetops outside of her window, the morning rides, the tennis lessons, the swimming,

the loafing, the sailing; the freedom from worrying, from slaving at her repertoire, from stage fright, the delicious independence from fickle audiences; the largesse of the place, the paradise of a tool shed, the enormous icebox in the kitchen, the old silver in the pantry, the shine and gleam and joy of a well-groomed household; the cleanliness of it all, pervading the very air that blew in from the coast—and the little shiver of pleasure it gave her to feel the great A.W. tremble with humility and reverence whenever she permitted him to kiss her.

The only sour note in the harmonious enjoyment of that summer was struck by Pokey. Poor Pokey, for all her genteel upbringing and college education, just didn't fit in. Pokey didn't like the country nor the high-class people who came in never-ending streams to pay their calls to the Huysmans and survey dear Alan's fiancée. It was all so completely, so utterly and unbearably different from what Pokey had hoped life among the millionaires would be. If she had openly quarreled with the Old Boy it would have cleared the atmosphere. But Pokey spent her days in a stiff cramp of politeness which turned into a disgusted malaise as soon as the doors of their guest suite closed behind them and they were alone. In one word, Pokey was homesick for the sweat and dirt and pushy mess and glorious muddle that was Broadway.

"If your friend doesn't like it at the Grange, why does she trouble herself staying on?" old Mrs. Huys-

mans remarked with the bluntness that was a privilege of her age.

"But I'm sure Pokey loves it here; it's just that she has a bit of a toothache," Marylynn tried to appease the ancient.

"Loves it? Toothache? Fiddle-faddle! She simply doesn't care for my poor boy," said the old lady. "I notice there are some people who don't take to him. Alan is a very shy boy; always was. You must treat him very nicely, child. He's very sensitive, although he wouldn't admit it. Very easily hurt. You must never hurt him, Mary."

"Of course not, ma'am; I wouldn't hurt him for anything in the world," Marylynn replied, cozily ensconced in her role of a tender and loyal family member.

But Pokey, to whom this motherly version of a shy and sensitive A. W. Huysmans was relayed, responded only with a loud, bitter, and grim burst of laughter. She quoted some of the most flagrantly stupid and malignant editorials of the *Star Tribune*, and ended up with such a copious eruption of profanity that Marylynn quickly closed the windows in order to prevent Ohmsted, who worked in the garden outside, from learning what her friend thought of Huysmans and all he stood for.

The next day, at lunch, the latent tension between Elizabeth Poker and A.W. came to a head. The tempest had been brewing in the teapot for more than a

week. At the storm center of it there was nothing more important than the perpetual argument about Ronny's pups. Ronny was Ohmsted's little boy, a freckled, snub-nosed, noisy, bouncing man of nine, whom a grizzly stray bitch had elected to be her master. Ronny loved that ugly, disreputable, and ill-mannered animal as only a little boy can love a dog that he has found on the street. He had named her Lady Diana, but in spite of her noble name the little mongrel was barely tolerated on the grounds of the Grange and strictly forbidden to show herself in company of the four beautiful and high-pedigreed dogs of the Manor. There were two Irish setters, one good-natured Dalmatian, and Mrs. Huysmans' smart French poodle, Rufus. Any of them might have sired the litter of eight gray, unattractive little sausages which Lady Diana put into the world with the indiscriminate fecundity characteristic of the Lower Classes. On the other hand, any one of the countless village dogs who had been howling at the fences might have been the father. When the pack of little mongrels began to scatter all over the place, roll in the flower beds, dig holes into the walks, leave yellow patches on the lawn, soil the doorsteps, and almost trip old Mrs. Huysmans, A.W. got angry and notified Ohmsted that the little bastards would have to be killed.

Alan W. Huysmans was known for his ruthlessness; he had ruined many of his opponents, politically, so-

cially, financially. He had driven some of them into suicide without batting an eyelash. He had maneuvered the stock market and influenced the industries, he had supported every reactionary movement, made no end of trouble for the government, blocked progress and justice, and always felt himself to be perfectly in the right. But for once Alan W. Huysmans was not entirely in the wrong when he claimed that thirteen dogs on the premises were nine too many, and he certainly had committed worse crimes than condemning these unlovely little bastards to death.

But it broke little Ronny's heart and Pokey made herself the champion of this lost cause. To her these hapless eight puppies stood for all the underprivileged who were ignored, insulted, or abused by Huysmans' newspapers, for all the minorities he never considered, for all the victims of his hard and narrow-minded disregard of human principles.

Huysmans was agreeably occupied with his eggs Benedictine when all of Poker's pent-up disgust came out in a speech the like of which had never been heard over the Huysmans dining table.

"Killing Ronny's little dogs but buying steaks from the black market for your own pooches, that's typical. It'll break Ronny's heart, it'll damage his character for life—but what do you care? About whom did you ever care but about yourself? What do you know about tolerance, Mr. Huysmans? Of course you won't

tolerate those poor little puppies who haven't done any harm to anyone. Off with them! Drown them! Poison them! Kill them, do away with them! Do away with everyone who isn't to Mr. Huysmans' taste—whether it's a little puppy on his doorstep or the President of the United States!"

A.W. put down his fork, and there was a silence in which nothing could be heard but the clicking of the old lady's false teeth as she was munching her puréed asparagus tips. Marylynn gave an embarrassed little laugh. "Aw, come off your soapbox, Pokey," she said good-naturedly, but A.W. remained cold. "Miss Poker," he said sharply, "you seem to mistake Ronny's mongrels for another Sacco-Vanzetti case. To me bastards are bastards, and I don't want any of them on my estate."

"All right, Mr. Huysmans; you'll get rid of the pups and of me at the same time," Pokey said; she put down her napkin, indicated a little bow in the direction of the old lady, and muttering a choked "If you'll kindly excuse me, Mrs. Huysmans," she left the table.

After lunch, when Marylynn went out to search for Pokey, she found her in the tool shed, where she had furiously gathered the oppressed little pups into their small crate. "Come out of here and get some fresh air, Pokey," Marylynn said. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

"It chokes me. It suffocates me. Everybody! Every-

thing! Everything! This whole goddamned way of life; I never believed rich people could be so small, so stingy, so without a grain of generosity."

"That's how they got rich, I guess."

"They are not alive, not one of them. They've been made by a taxidermist; they are like the stuffed mammoths in the museum. There they sit and are afraid that someone will stick a needle into them and all the sawdust will run out. By and by I'll feel as if I have nothing but sawdust inside of me too. Why don't we pack our suitcases and get out of it before it's too late?"

"But, Pokey, it's what you wanted, isn't it? You wanted me to marry the Old Boy; what's eating you up now?"

"That's just it. I'm responsible for it. I got you into this. But I didn't know it would be like this. Huysmans going around and turning the lights off every time we leave a room, and the old woman counting the eggs in the icebox. I won't stand by and be responsible for your unhappiness!"

"Who's unhappy? I'm having the time of my life! I love it here, even if you don't."

"Yes, I know, I know! You love the Grange and you love the Garden Society. Chinook Beauty! Maggie Vandenholt! You love standing in a reception line and shaking hands with seventy-five Mmes. Fizzlebottom—but don't tell me that you'll love going to bed with Mr. Huysmans."

"Why shouldn't I? When he's such a darling, and it means so much to him and so little to me," Marylynn said out of the full innocence of her heart.

This, apparently, was an answer that kept Pokey speechless for several minutes. They had left the evil-smelling empire of Ronny's pups behind, walked up the driveway, and stood now before the sundial on the front lawn.

"That's a part of you I'll never understand, Mary," Poker said at last, fastidious.

"No, I guess not. Not you, Pokey. It's a pity you take sex so important. Don't you see that it's fun to make a man happy if it can be done so easy?" Marylynn said pleasantly. She traced with her sun-browned fingers the old-fashioned numbers on the sundial, and there was for a moment that wistful and expectant expression on her face again that Poker could never see without wondering what was concealed behind it.

"I guess it would be different if I was in love with another guy. Some girls do it, but I don't think I could: be in love with one fellow and marry another. I suppose I'm lucky that I've never fallen real hard for any one man. Keeps me free for anything that comes my way, see?"

Pokey hesitated a moment before she asked: "And what about Luke?"

"Well, what about him?"

"Don't you miss him?"

"Sure, I miss him. Don't you?"

Pokey's face became stubborn. "We are not talking about me—we are talking about you and Luke. How do you think he'll feel when he comes back and finds you married to Old Man Huysmans?"

"You should have thought of that before you dressed me up like Orphan Annie and brought me out here and told me to go after the Old Boy," Marylynn said. "But don't worry, Pokey; either Luke'll be glad to be rid of me or he'll be beautifully heart-broken for two weeks at least. In either case he'll write a good song about it, and that's the only thing that counts with him. Right?"

Pokey shrugged her shoulders. The same afternoon Lady Diana's children were put to sleep, and Pokey packed in silent protest and left for New York.

In August, out of a sultry midsummer sky, Luke Jordan appeared in New York. He was yellow with Atabrine, whittled down to the bones, his face a sharp cubistic pattern of shades and holes, his melancholic Polish eyes making fun of experiences which he never mentioned, and he walked on a cane. "Hello, Poker-face," he said, as though he had left only yesterday and everything were in the best of order.

"Great Lord, Luke, what did they do to you?" Bess cried, for once caught unawares.

He gave her his familiar grin past the cigarette in

the corner of his mouth. "Didn't you know I'm an outrageous case of flat feet? Mind if I sit down?"

Bess knew him too well to ask many questions, and he would not have answered them anyway. All he reported to her was that he was waiting for his medical discharge at Halloran, that the Army was loath to pay an invalid's pension to a guy with just flat feet, that he played a much better poker game than before the war, and that his fallen arches would probably be straightened out in six weeks if he didn't die of griping and boredom before. From other sources Bess extricated by and by the information that Luke had been hit in the shinbone during an air raid, that a grave infection had set in, and that only recently were the doctors sure they would not have to amputate. Luke himself never came closer to talking about all this than by mentioning once: "You know, Poker-face, there is something funny about us nervous, hysterical, goddamned artistic East Side guys. The psychoneurotic wards are filled to the rafters with two-hundred-pound footballers and Li'l Abners from the farms, but guys of my sort are mentally so unbalanced that one little war more doesn't seem to make much difference. Besides, having been Marylynn's coach and friend for several years was good basic training and prepared me for all the horrors of the jungle."

Marylynn was still on the Grange. Unpredictable as Luke Jordan was, he accepted her absence plus her impending marriage with a casualness that appeared

somewhat too callous. "So she caught herself the biggest fish in the pond, did she? Well, she'll get a lot of alimony out of him when they divorce," was all he said.

"You haven't a very high opinion of her, have you?"

"The very highest. I know damn well that Marylynn is the only girl who knows how to put over my songs."

Bess braced herself against a stormy command to produce Marylynn on the spot and put her completely at Luke's disposal. Only when he went back to camp without demanding to see the girl did Bess perceive how deeply he must be hurt. There were three weeks of complete silence on his part, and when he popped up again he dropped a batch of music on the piano. "I'd like you to look at the stuff; it's no good, but it's the best I could do under the circumstances."

Bess Poker, who had been starving for just this, grew completely silent while Luke flung himself into a frenzy of crowing, singing, playing the piano, stomping the floor, drumming the basses, and pulling her into the irresistible vortex of his rhythms. "Well?" he asked when she said nothing at all.

"Oh, Luke, I didn't know you could do it. You've gone so far beyond yourself——"

Immediately he grew angry and began furiously tearing his fever-thinned hair. "I didn't ask you for some idiotic compliments! What I want is criticism.

If *you* can't tell me why the second chorus doesn't make sense, who can?"

Bess was still vibrating with the excitement of having Luke in the same room, all of him: his hands, his long legs, thank God still both of them, his egotism, his sweep, his music; she would have wanted to throw her arms around his neck, to stroke his poor thin red hair, to fling herself away, just once, just once. But knowing only too well that abandonment was the last thing anticipated from her, she squared her shoulders, clasped her hands in her lap as a means of self-control, and set the analytical portion of her mind to work. "I think it doesn't make sense because it doesn't want to be a song," she said, concentrating firmly on the issue at hand. "I think it wants to be built up to a climax; it wants to be developed much more than you can do in a song. If you ask me, I think what you have got here has the makings of the second finale of a musical comedy."

"Well, I'll be darned!" said Luke. He grabbed his sheets of music, forgot his cane, and stumbled out of the door.

Ten days later he appeared, with a discharge button on his gray flannel suit, grown too large for him and smelling of moth balls. He brought two suitcases, a bottle of scotch, a crisp new ration book, Arnold Schönberg's *Harmonielehre*, and an exotic-looking, rather filthy Indian silk scarf for Poker. "You don't mind if I move in with you, Pokerface?" he said.

"This house is much too large for you alone anyway."

"I'm stuck with the lease; I'm trying to sublet it, but no luck, so far."

"Broke?"

"Oh, I can manage," she said lightly. But Luke knew better.

"Tell you what. I'll pay the rent for the time being; saved up a few bucks while Uncle Sam was paying me for doing nothing; and as soon as we have that hit on Broadway I'll buy you the Taj Mahal."

"What hit, for God's sake?"

"My musical comedy. I think I'm going to call it *Why Not Tonight?* Smart title, isn't it? I've got a lot of good music for it, and some very funny lyrics too. Tailor-made. Wrote them myself. There was nothing else I could do in that hospital. Met a guy, name of Dale Corbett, who's promised to get me the backing for the show. He's in politics but wears no string tie. Tickles his vanity to pose as a benefactor of the arts and discoverer of the local talent. Musical, too. He can rattle off the first half of 'Rustles of Spring' on the piano and recognizes Ravel's 'Bolero' almost every time it's played on the air. All we need now is a good man for the sets and maybe a little play doctor. Well, that's a cinch. First thing, I've got to shave, and then I must talk to Marylynn."

He left Poker wrestling with her amazement and hobbled upstairs, where she heard him take possession of Marylynn's bedroom. The idea of Luke's long-

boned and uncompromising manliness fitting itself into the padded feminine velvet luxury of that room was so funny that Pokey's tension cracked and left her laughing as she hadn't laughed in many months.

When he came downstairs again, Bess was fixing his special Rum Collins for him, the house smelled of apple pie and wet leaves and summer's end, and in the dining room Connie was humming happily to herself as she set the table for two.

"Well, well," Luke said, rubbing his hands. "Just you and me. Like being married, isn't it?"

"Almost," said Bess Poker. My leitmotif, she thought, with the self-irony which always stood guard over her. Getting everything I want—almost. "I've talked to Marylynn over the phone," she said. "Of course she wants to see you, too, and why don't you take the eight-twenty train tomorrow morning? She would send Wallace down to the station to meet you."

"Wallace who?"

"Their chauffeur, you know."

"Mr. Huysmans' chauffeur, what? All right. Phone her again and tell her that I appreciate the invitation and that I'll be delighted to meet her at any place she wants, but that I'll be goddamned if I set foot in Mr. Huysmans' malodorous establishment. Tell her that I have to talk to her and that I want her to come here pronto and that she better hurry up."

Bess Poker was too clever a manager to relay

Luke's message, but when Marylynn came to town for the last fitting of her bridal gown she found herself quite unexpectedly confronted with him. There was a complete lack of melodrama. "How you been, kid?" he asked.

"Thanks, fine; and how's yourself?"

"Couldn't be better. Oh, by the way, I almost forgot. Congratulations and all that. How's it feel to play the part of the blushing bride?"

"Never mind; feels good enough."

"No use getting angry, sweetheart. I want you to do me a favor. I want you to have dinner with me and a very nice man, you may have heard of him. It's that young hopeful, busybodying in every damn committee in town—Mr. Dale Corbett. You'll like him and he'll like you."

"Dinner? What day?"

"Tonight."

"I can't tonight. I've got to be in Oyster Bay tonight; A.W. is giving a little party for me—a family affair, you know. Just his mother and his sons and daughters-in-law."

"Sounds perfectly dazzling. How about tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow I've got to go back to the Grange with the old lady."

"I see. I forgot that you're back in kindergarten. I thought you were of age and comparatively free."

"Don't you see, it's only six days to my wedding?"

Naturally I haven't got much spare time. Who did you say was the other fellow? Dale Corbett? No, I don't think A.W. would like that. They don't see eye to eye in politics."

"Poor Monkey, they sure got you in a cage! Now look here—we're old friends; if you'd ask me a little favor, I certainly wouldn't make silly excuses. This Corbett guy is very important to me, and he's dying to meet you. I'll explain it to you——"

"You don't have to, Pokey told me. You need him to raise the money for your show, and you want me to work on him. Is that it?"

"If you want to express it so crudely. But wouldn't it be fun to show your fiancé that you're not a prisoner? It would clear the air, wouldn't it?"

Marylynn gave him a husky chuckle. "You—*maquereau!*" she said.

"Beg your pardon?"

"You can look it up in the French dictionary. And the answer is: sorry, pal. No can do."

"Okay, forget it. But at least you could hum a few of my new songs for me. I've got to hear them before I begin orchestrating."

"You got them here? Let me look at them."

The moment Marylynn touched the sheets of music she received something like an electric shock. The blood rushed to her face as she said: "I'll try, but you mustn't yell at me. I'm a bit out of training, you know."

"I expected that much—in every respect," Luke said insolently and began to play. Through the smoke of his cigarette he gave Bess a little wink and she tiptoed obligingly out of the room, leaving them to themselves.

Upstairs she sat down in her own room, locked out from whatever it was the two downstairs were doing. This was as it always had been, as if Luke had never been to the war and wounded. She listened to the music that came through the walls to her, Luke's music, and she told herself with the queer bitter pride of the unwanted: Yes, but it was to me that he played it first. Downstairs, Marylynn's singing, then their quarrels rising with much sound and fury, Luke's fierce banging away on the piano, then the long, heavy, eloquent silences. Then the small sound of a conversation starting anew, like birds talking to each other before sunup, till at last the piano and the voices down there went into another embrace.

At eleven o'clock Old Man Huysmans called up from Oyster Bay to ask if Mary was going to meet him for lunch at the River Club. But when Poker put her head in the door of the living room she was brusquely shooed out by Luke. "Marylynn is sorry, but she has a hairdresser's appointment," she told Huysmans, and there was a fine trace of triumph in calling Mary once again Marylynn. At noon she sent Connie in with a tray which was returned untouched. "They's working like a house on fire," Connie an-



nounced radiantly. "Sure 'nough, Mister Luke never done wrote nothing so beautiful before." By three o'clock they seemed well toward the finale of the second act; and shortly after four, Wallace appeared with the car to take Miss Lynn to Long Island. "Tell him to go to hell," Luke said without lifting his fingers from the keyboard. "Can't you see we're working?"

"Yes, tell him not to wait for me. I don't need him. I'll take the six-o'clock train," Marylynn added.

But she never did.

It was very quiet in the sickroom where Marylynn lay with closed eyes, a fine spray of perspiration covering her skin with a dull mother-of-pearl shine. It was so quiet that you could hear one single petal of the quickly wilted roses drop to the floor while Dr. Bassington was studying the chart. 2:25 P.M.: temperature 99.2; pulse: 112, fairly strong. Respiration slightly improved. Patient asleep.

But Marylynn was not asleep. She did not want to sleep, she wanted to remember. She wanted to grope her way through the blanket of confusion with which the anesthetic had smothered her mind; she was walking through sticky, clinging layers of spider web and she wanted to cut through and remember what had happened to her, why she had a pain in her chest, and why she was in a hospital once more. There were things which she could remember with

great clarity, and others, evasive and intangible and fragmentary, like the experiences of a dream, and in between there were gaps and hollows which she couldn't fill in, hard as she tried. Of one thing she was sure, though. Somewhere, sometime, something beautiful had happened to her; whatever road it was that had taken her to this hospital bed, she knew that on the way she had met a warm light, a dawn, a rainbow, a morning star, a great enveloping sweetness; it was waiting for her outside, and she had to get well quickly to meet it again. Carefully, step by step, she had gone through that summer on the Grange as one might cross a river stepping from one slippery precarious pebble to the next. It was silly to remember so very well Lady Diana and her eight hapless puppies, or the slant of rain on the sweep of lawn behind the house, or the funny way a gray *postiche* was perched on thrifty Mrs. Huysmans' own snow white hair—and yet not be able to recall the most important thing that had ever happened to herself. Then she came to grips with a few scraps of melody, and she hung onto them and pieced them together and there it was, triumphantly: the second finale, the great hit song of *Why Not Tonight?* Suddenly it all came back to her in a happy rush of remembrances: Luke returning from the war, Luke sweeping her into a fever of work, Luke filling her to the brim with cocky self-assurance, Luke begging, imploring, coddling her, spoiling her like the most precious thing on earth,

Luke scolding her, making fun of her, brutalizing her, treating her like dirt. All the preparations, the fears, the hopes, the excitement, the rehearsals, tantrums, rows, desperations, nervous breakdowns and resurrections; the whole madness preceding a Broadway opening—plus a lot of Luke Jordan. And then the sublime moment when the last curtain came down over their battle won; the sudden delicious fatigue after reaching the peak, as only mountaineers and actors and satisfied lovers know it: "We did it, Luke, we did it, you and me, we two together, we did it. . . ."

When Marylynn had traveled that far in her memories she opened her eyes and whispered a question into the silent room:

"Luke?"

Dr. Bassington put down the chart and pulled a chair up at her bedside. He still smelled of D'Orsay Lotion, but also of sweat and disinfectant. "Well, well, well, did we have a little rest?" he said coaxingly, while unobtrusively testing her pulse. "We are doing splendidly, my dear, splendidly. Now we'll give you a little medicine to clear the cobwebs off our brain, and if you promise me to keep very quiet and to talk very little I might allow you to hold hands with your husband for five minutes; now don't say we are not treating you nicely in this hospital, what?"

"Don't move, dear," said Miss Cripps, who in the meantime had put a little rubber hose around Mary-

lynn's arm, cleaned the crook of her elbow with alcohol, and was now sticking another needle into her vein. Marylynn closed her eyes, and when she opened them again Dr. Bassington had evaporated; or possibly he had never been there at all. My husband? Marylynn thought. Of course—my husband.

Success was sweet; to be back on Broadway and to know that you had made the hit of the season was the sweetest thing she had ever experienced. She had not thought that anything could taste still sweeter than that; yet the half hour before dawn when she and Luke were riding in a cab through the Park that night had been still sweeter. After all the cheering and toasting and drinking and celebrating and making the rounds, this was their own quiet celebration. This half hour belonged to the two of them and to no one else—not even to Pokey. It was tranquil and calm and good to ride like that. Clopety-clop, clopety-clop, went the sleepy hoofs of the nag; the air was cold, but Marylynn felt warm in her fur coat, the coverlet pulled up to her nose and Luke holding her tightly to his own ever-blazing stove of a body.

“Happy, kid?”

“Never been so happy in my life.”

“What a dope you were, trying to run out on me and on Broadway.”

“Yeah. I guess I was silly. I got scared, you know. But now I’m going to show them.”

“Everyone is scared at one time or another; but

you didn't have to make such an outsized mess of things the moment I turned my back."

"It just goes to show how much I need you, Luke."

"That's okay; but you really didn't have to get yourself engaged to that old buzzard just to show me how much you missed me."

"That's something different. I wanted to get married."

"Married? Holy Gershwin! What for?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand the half of it. But didn't you notice that most people do get married sooner or later? It's natural." He gathered her tighter and said gently: "Poor little chipmunk, you must have wanted to get married awfully bad if you would have taken even old Huysmans."

"Why, I still think he's nice and I'm still sorry he took it so hard," she said with her own sort of loyalty. Something in that remark, she didn't know what, infuriated Luke; he pushed her away a little as he shouted angrily into her face: "But, you dope, if you have to get married at any price—why not marry me?"

Marylynn remembered the shock it gave her, the surprise, the queer relief. Very clearly she remembered how the two little clouds of steam that hung between them in the cold air merged into one and how Luke took his cigarette out of his mouth as he waited for her answer. And she remembered how she had stared at him for several seconds—clopety-clop,

clopety-clop, clopety-clop timed the horses' hoofs—before she had said: "You're right. Why not?"

That was a funny way of getting engaged, she thought, and began to laugh softly. A thin sharp needle of pain stabbed through her, and Miss Cripps was at her side at once. "Would you like to see your husband now, dear? Doctor gave you permission. Shall I call him in?"

"My husband? Is he here?" Marylynn whispered, surprised. Her mind had wandered so far afield that she could hardly believe in the real presence of real persons who were not only shadows and memories.

"Of course he is here, dear. He's been waiting outside this door since early this morning."

"Yes, please. Call Luke in," she whispered gratefully.

Now it was Miss Cripps's turn to be surprised. "Luke? Do you mean Mr. Luke Jordan? You want to see him first? Are you sure?"

"Yes. Please call Luke in."

Miss Cripps shrugged her prim and offended shoulder and opened the door to the anteroom. "The patient wants to see Mr. Jordan first," she announced, leaving the room and quickly but noiselessly closing the door over the turmoil her announcement caused in the anteroom. Marylynn kept her eyes on that door, waiting for Luke to enter and explain a few things to her. While she thus waited, the last injection began to take effect and all contours grew clearer.

She saw the frugal furnishings of the sickroom, the roses drooping in the heat, she heard the minutes tick by in great haste and then found the electric clock on the chest of drawers. There were strange noises outside of that door, and it took Luke so long to appear that Marylynn began to hurt all over and to feel every one of her fast, weak heartbeats counting the time. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again there was Luke, standing at her bedside. He was in his shirt sleeves, looking very disorderly and rumpled, fumbling with his necktie that had become undone or torn. He looked as if he were just coming out of a drunken binge, but Marylynn knew him well enough to see that he was quite sober.

"Gosh, Luke, I'm glad you're here," she whispered. "I don't understand anything. What happened to me?"

"You mustn't talk, Monkey. Let me do the talking and take it easy. You're doing fine."

"Yes, but where is Pokey?"

"She's all right, too. Now listen, kid——"

"Pokey was mad at me. Now I remember."

"Yes, I know. But that doesn't matter now."

"Is she still mad at me? She was very mad."

"No. I'm sure she isn't mad at you any longer. But you mustn't be mad at her either. Promise?"

"Yes, but what happened?"

"Pokey hurt you, kid."

"Pokey? Not Pokey."

"Yes, she did. Don't you know that? Now listen to me, Chipmunk, they won't let me talk to you more than five minutes, and this is terribly important. A little later a very nice man will come and ask you a few questions. He is a police officer, but very nice. Are you listening, kid?"

"Yes, Luke," Marylynn said obediently. "I'm listening. . . ."



LUKE JORDAN had once said of Dale Corbett that he came in layers like an onion. On top there was a skin of being suave and worldly and filled with human kindness; next came the small-town boy who had made good—and it was this remnant of small-townishness that was such an asset in Corbett's political career. Underneath there was a layer of being brainy, even brilliant, and shrewd, and calculating; but all this was padded and cushioned by the next layer, which consisted more of some pleasant native qualities than of individual ones: good nature, neighborliness, a frontier man's readiness to be helpful and a good fellow. And then, toward the center of this onion Dale Corbett, where the layers of his character got firmer and thicker and tighter, there was a lot of

vanity and cockiness; and then another soft little skin containing all that was out of Corbett's control and made him commit blunders, chase ideological butterflies—or fall in love with a dangerous woman like Marylynn. The rest was all ambition. And when you were through peeling layer after layer off this young lawyer who had a chance to be some day President of the United States, you would discover that inside of it there was no core at all.

That morning, after Lee Crenshaw's totally unexpected appearance, Corbett had left the hospital in a tearing rage. If Marylynn had died right then and there, he would have felt that it served her right. He had been duped, and he tortured himself by trying to analyze the case and finding out when and where and how he had given Marylynn a reason to treat him like an idiot. By noon he knew that his latest blunder couldn't be undone; the newspapers headlined his rash and cocksure statement about his intention of marrying Marylynn and his pretty tirades about their great love, along with the fairly sensational news that Marylynn had been secretly wedded to an unknown Lee Crenshaw for the last three weeks. The headlines openly made fun of him, the *Star Tribune's* gossip columnist Schreckenbacher called him a romantic dreamer (the worst thing that could be said about a man in politics), and in the photos of himself and Crenshaw printed on page four he came off a poor second. He didn't need Ferguson's asthmatic

yelling, accusing, and lamenting to bring home to him how much harm he had done to his political career. He knew that a certain amount of stupidity could be rather an asset on Capitol Hill; that insincerity and even dishonesty could be disguised and appreciated as the gifts of a brilliant political mind; but to be made ridiculous and pilloried publicly as an obvious fool was fatal. And so, when Dale Corbett, after his fight with Ferguson, furiously grabbed the telephone and urgently offered himself to take over Elizabeth Poker's defense, he did so not out of kindness and an objective desire for justice, but partly to take revenge on Marylynn and partly to worm and drill himself into the inside of events he didn't understand at all.

Their meeting was as casual as the room in which they met; a smallish office filled to the ceiling with the jungle heat of New York. Walls of an unhealthy drab, badly in need of a fresh coat of paint; a wooden bench, a desk, two chairs, all of it unhospitable and grouchy from too many years of police duty; in one corner a leaky faucet slowly dripping water into a pitiful chipped washbasin; and in the other a ventilator with one crooked blade that made it revolve in a small crackling staccato. By contrast, Poker appeared clean and fresh, and for the first time Corbett noticed that she looked smart, almost too well groomed for a woman in her predicament. But maybe this impres-

sion was only a by-product of his new, fierce anger at Marylynn.

"Hello, Dale—it's good of you to visit me; won't you sit down?" she said, pointing to the bench as if it were still the davenport in the living room on Sutton Place.

"Thanks, Poker. I'm glad you sent for me at last, and I'll try my best to assist you." He had worked out a complete plan and launched at once into a prepared little speech. "We've always been friends, Poker, but you must understand that the relation between a client and her attorney is on the one hand still more intimate than a mere friendship, yet on the other hand more impersonal. I'll have to ask you many questions which might embarrass you. I'll have to throw the beam of my flashlight into every nook and corner, and if you want me to help you my first condition is that you be completely frank, that you tell me the absolute truth and not conceal anything; you understand that, don't you?"

"Sure, Dale, sure," Poker said, waving aside the somewhat inflated rhetoric Corbett had acquired during his years as an assemblyman. "I'll have to ask you a few questions myself—that's why I called for you. First of all I want to know: did they arrest Luke Jordan?"

Corbett was on the alert at once. "Jordan? No. Why? Has he anything to do with the shooting?"

"No! That's just it. That's the most important

thing I want you to do for me: make it absolutely clear to them that Luke had nothing to do with it. Nothing whatsoever! Why, Luke hasn't talked to me or Marylynn since summer '45, when he came to Paris for a reconciliation that didn't come off. You must see to it that the police don't get silly notions about Luke being jealous or something. He didn't know anything about this marriage of Marylynn's."

"But you did! Since when?" Corbett asked quickly, and all the rage and fury of the insulted male rose in a hot wave to his brain.

"Not until last night. It came as much as a surprise to me as it must have been to you," Bess said, not meaning to be ironic; but it irritated Corbett all the same.

"Except that I didn't shoot."

"Good for you. But what about Luke? You haven't answered me yet."

"You don't have to worry about him—he's been pacing the hospital floor since four o'clock this morning."

Bess knew that she was turning pale; it felt like a slowly rising coldness that stiffened every nerve and vein. How much he must still love her, in spite of everything, she thought. "Oh, is that where he is?" she said very quietly. "That means that Marylynn isn't dead."

"Do you wish she were?"

"No, Dale, oh no; how could I? Do you?"

"My personal feelings don't enter into this at all. I'm your attorney now and have nothing in mind but to get you off as easy as possible. Besides, I'm a civilized person, and evidently I wish Marylynn and her young man nothing but happiness. I hope to God that she will recover. However, I won't conceal from you," he added, unable to suppress completely the very faintest trace of satisfaction in his voice, "that her condition is still very critical. I'm in constant telephonic contact with Sid Carp, and he just informed me that she is not past the danger point yet."

"Does she suffer much? Lord Almighty, I didn't want to hurt her. The poor girl—I wouldn't want to hurt her for anything in the world."

Corbett pounced on this admission with an attorney's agility: "Then you didn't have the intention of shooting her?"

"I wanted to kill her. But I didn't want to hurt her. Can't you see, Dale, it was all such a muddle?—I still don't know how it happened. I remember that when I took that gun I wanted to kill myself; every minute since then I've tried to understand why I hit Marylynn instead. I know it sounds crazy, but I always put Marylynn in my place. It was *my* career which Marylynn made, and *my* successes she had and *my* love affairs and *my* life. So when she wanted to take it all away from me it was *my* suicide that killed her."

It sounded crazy enough for Corbett to speculate that he could probably plead insanity for Poker.

Aloud he said, however: "Fortunately you didn't kill her, Poker; I hope you understand the legal situation. So far you are booked under suspicion of assault with a deadly weapon; if Marylynn pulls through you'll get away with a sentence of from one to five years. Maybe I can prove you insane or at least temporarily insane and get you off scot-free. In other words, the whole case would fizzle out quietly." (And that was what Corbett hoped to achieve—as much for his own sake as for Poker's.) "If Marylynn dies, on the other hand, things look pretty bad. Manslaughter. If the D.A. gets nasty he might even pin you down for premeditated murder. By the way, where did you get the gun?"

"Out of that little French commode in Marylynn's bedroom, you remember it? She kept it there with her evening bags."

"Funny place to keep a gun."

"She wanted to have it at hand since a burglar tried to break into our basement last spring."

"Legally speaking, it's bad that you took it out of a drawer. That makes it premeditated. If you had just grabbed it blindly . . . Did you know it was loaded?"

"Of course I did. It was a German Luger. A soldier gave it to her as a souvenir, but he took out the magazine so she could use it as a harmless paperweight. But a few weeks ago that soldier visited us in New York, and when he heard about that burglar he fixed

and loaded the gun and told us to be careful but keep it handy, just in case."

"Do you remember the name of the soldier?"

"Yes. It was Sergeant Lee Crenshaw."

"The husband?" Corbett shouted; vaguely he sensed that there might be a possibility of involving that hateful rival of his. But Poker said with the same air of quiet sarcasm: "Yes, the husband, Dale. And you can't bring him into this either. He hasn't been in New York for a week. He was safely and innocently fixing up their apartment in Taunton, getting everything ready to receive the bride—that's what Marylynn told me. It was one of the things that drove me into a rage last night."

Corbett sighed at this information. "You seem to defend everybody but yourself, Poker. It's you we have to worry about."

Bess shrugged resigned shoulders. "What's there to worry about, Dale? I'm finished, one way or the other. I don't care a hoot what happens to me."

Dale Corbett decided that he had to break this attitude if he was to get all the information he wanted. "You are only numb from the shock, Poker. Why don't you let me bail you out and take you home?"

"No, thanks, Dale. I'm better off where I am. There couldn't be a worse place for me than what you call home—don't you understand that?"

If Corbett understood he didn't feel like wasting time on any psychological problems but went directly

at the matter that interested him personally. "This Crenshaw—was he a frequent visitor at Sutton Place?"

"You mean did Marylynn carry on an affair with him while she strung you along?" Poker said, too absorbed for subtleties—and Corbett clamped his back teeth together till they hurt. "I suppose she did, but I assure you that I didn't know anything about it. Everything happened behind my back, from the beginning to the end."

"We've both been duped, haven't we, Poker?"

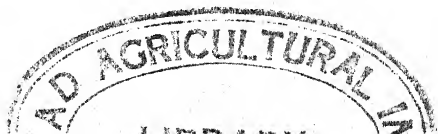
"I'm sorry, Dale. I was all for you." She smiled a little as she added: "If you became President of the United States of America ten years from now, I was sure Marylynn would have made you a very lovely First Lady. But she preferred to be Mrs. Lee Crenshaw, and that's all there is to it."

"What sort of a boy is this Crenshaw?"

"Oh, he's nice," Poker said, and a second later it came back to her like an echo of Marylynn's lazy approval.

"You know him well?"

"What's there to know? We've met a few hundred thousand like him on our U.S.O. tours. That's just it. I'm only beginning to realize that his type is all Marylynn ever wanted. He could be the twin brother of a guy with whom Marylynn used to run around as a high-school kid—and the twin brother of a million other nice American boys. He was our driver on that



U.S.O. tour in Luxemburg and Belgium—I remember that I was puzzled, because I was almost sure I had met him before and couldn't trace him. 'I know I've seen this boy before, but where, where?' I kept on asking, because it annoyed me like a melody which you know and can't place. 'For God's sake, stop bothering about that fool sergeant,' Marylynn told me. In the middle of the night, while we were hobbling along one of those forlorn Belgian side roads, it suddenly came to me. 'Now I have it! He looks exactly like Jack!' I yelled. 'Jack who?' Marylynn asked me. 'Jack—that kid from Blythe—your first love—the boy you wanted to marry.' 'I've never known any Jack,' Marylynn said blithely. Well, that's Marylynn for you. For her, nothing exists but the present. It's always today and now. Grasshoppers have a singularly short memory, Luke always used to say when she forgot her lines. I was too stupid to see what was going on between her and that Lee Crenshaw. I had a bad 'flu at that time, and they packed me into the back of the car to sleep off my fever. Sometimes I heard them banter in the front; 'Oh, quick-freeze yourself!' Marylynn would say when he got a little fresh. It was the latest wisecrack I had worked out for her, and it always went over big with the boys. I would fall asleep, and when I woke up again they would be very silent. I thought they were just tired out. We were there during that break-through in the Ardennes, but Crenshaw was so calm and natural

that we never realized any danger. Now I know when I made my great mistake. One evening when I was washing our things in a little tub he had requisitioned for us, I said to Marylynn: 'I like our sergeant. Don't you think he's nice?' 'Who? Sergeant Crenshaw? I think he's awful,' Marylynn answered. That's when I should have listened. There never had been a man before that Marylynn didn't think nice. To me he was one of a million sergeants. But to her he was the Only One, and that's the whole stupid, idiotic truth."

There was little consolation for Corbett in this report, yet he found one brighter thread in the dull texture and began picking at it. "In other words, she was carrying on this affair not only behind your back but also behind Luke Jordan's. And when you found out you shot her?"

"What melodramatic nonsense, Dale! Avenge Luke Jordan's honor? Why should I?"

"Because you love him," Corbett said, and Bess turned white. She got up suddenly on unsteady legs and began pacing in a circle around the shopworn desk. Corbett, proud of having hit the center, kept on hammering. "You love Luke Jordan, you've never loved anyone but him. That's the key to everything, isn't it?"

Bess kept on pacing round and round in her invisible cage. There it was now, her innermost secret, so well concealed all these years; raw and twitching—her heart's heart on the dissecting table. She strug-

gled to regain her composure. "All right, Dale. All right. I didn't know my slip was showing all the time. I love Luke—God knows that I tried hard to get rid of it, but I can't help it. I love him. And I gave him to Marylynn, served him up to her on a silver platter. And look what a mess she made of the man! The way she played with him and dropped him again—and for what? For marrying a Lee Crenshaw and bearing little Crenshaw brats and cooking Crenshaw meals and fetching the Crenshaw slippers. What does Marylynn care if Luke goes to the dogs?—and he does go to the dogs fast. I saw him last night—he looks terrible; all the drinking, all the dissipating, all that boisterous living against himself. I know Luke. He had one flop since Marylynn left him, and he's been writing bad music ever since. How many more flops can he stand, do you think? And he knows it himself, better than anyone else. The last time I talked to him he said: 'I'm like a gin fizz made of synthetic gin and the fizz gone flat. No wonder Broadway has spit me out!'"

Dale Corbett listened to the outburst with a certain degree of pleasure. It was soothing to his own bruised self-respect to picture Luke Jordan irrevocably ruined by Marylynn, while he himself would in the end get out unscathed—or so he hoped, in spite of Ferguson's somber prophecies. Also, with a little coaching one could probably make a good case of this Poker girl and impress any jury. "When did you talk to Jordan last?"

"But I told you: In spring '45 in Paris."

"And never since? So help you, God?"

"So help me, God. Luke wouldn't have talked to me to save my life. He blamed me for everything. For his marriage, for breaking up the marriage, for their separation, for his flop. He knew me and he knew Marylynn and he didn't believe that Marylynn had a will of her own; but she had, for the first time in her life, when she refused to go back to him. And neither I nor death nor devil could have broken it. I didn't understand it then. I didn't know that in the meantime she had fallen in love with her Sergeant Crenshaw. After all the love affairs which didn't mean a thing to her she had fallen in love for the first time. It's a spectacle so funny that you can laugh your head off about it, or so touching that it makes you cry, but there it is. Marylynn, reborn at the age of twenty-eight by the miracle of a great love. If I had known it then, maybe I could have made Luke understand it. As it was, he called me Marylynn's bad demon—and I never learned the truth until last night."

She was still walking in circles and talking in circles. Corbett felt slightly confused, especially as his personal feelings were mixed up in the emotional tangle. "Do you mind if I make a few notes about the chronological order of events?" he asked matter-of-factly. "Do you mean to say that Marylynn and Luke Jordan had separated before she met her irresistible sergeant?"

"Exactly. I arranged that U.S.O. tour for her only after their crack-up. I hoped that after a cooling-off period they would make up again. What a fool I've been!"

Dale Corbett's forehead turned red, and he rubbed it vigorously as he remarked: "I don't want to be personal, but at that time Marylynn gave me reason to believe that she got tired of her marriage since we became friends. I suppose you would say that she played me for a sucker."

"Not at all, Dale. Marylynn is too lazy and too indolent to be anything but sincere. In our team, I was necessarily the calculating one. Marylynn liked you very much, and if she hadn't met Crenshaw I think she would have married you eventually."

"Thanks all the same," Corbett said, feeling as if a clumsy dentist had touched a raw nerve. "How long did that marriage with Luke last altogether?"

"Six months and seventeen days—and every day of it was hell for all three of us; but it was the worst hell for me. How do you think I felt when Luke told me: 'I bought a love nest for Marylynn and me in Nyack and you can have the guestroom upstairs'? It's an old house and very acoustic, and I had to hear everything whether I wanted to or not. They quarreled and they were noisy and Marylynn threw her shoes at Luke—she doesn't smash plates, but she throws her shoes about when she gets mad—they grew silent and they made up and they giggled and they kissed and they

called me into their bedroom in the morning and they slouched around in their pajamas all Sunday long; and during the week they were too tired even to talk to me. Six evening performances and two matinees, plus all the fights and the love-making was too much, even for Marylynn. I had to keep her going with vitamin shots and massage; and Luke, poor guy, drank eggnoggs day and night while he was trying to write a new show. And both came to me to complain about each other. Marylynn told me that this was not a marriage, it was like being caught in a monkey cage, except that monkey girls could have all the babies they wanted and Broadway stars couldn't, not if they had a hit running at capacity houses. And Luke would come in fuming and tearing his hair and yelling at me that he'd break Marylynn's neck if she brought one more ruffled chintz curtain into the house or baked one more waffle for him. It was as flagrant a case of incompatibility as you ever want to see, and me as the bumper between the two——"

"But why did they marry in the first place?"

"If you ask Luke he'll tell you that I pushed them into that marriage. Maybe I did. I never was very interested in my subconscious, but maybe it was at work against me all the time. Maybe subconsciously I felt that their marriage would make me stop carrying my hopeless little torch for Luke Jordan. Or maybe I substituted Marylynn once more for myself. If I couldn't marry him, she could, and in a way that

was a fulfillment of some dream that must have been brewing inside of me for a long time. Except that this marriage didn't turn out the way I expected. Nothing ever did—not even that shot last night. I've been a stupid, blind, bungling fool all along—and the worst fool when I thought to be very clever. I always had the most wonderfully reasonable reasons when I acted unreasonably. After Marylynn broke with Old Huysmans I played up her romance with Luke because it was good publicity and we needed good publicity for putting over that first show of theirs. But as a publicity item even the love of Romeo and Juliet would turn stale after a few weeks, and you've got to top it either with a scandal or with a marriage. I talked it over with Sid Carp from every angle, and we thought that marriage would be better at that particular moment. Well, the scandal came later, anyway, and it wasn't of my planning. I made the best of it. I took Marylynn on that U.S.O. tour, and that was as good a move as any manager could have worked out. It made her much more popular than if she had stayed on Broadway. I thought a separation of a few weeks would give us a little rest and be good for all three of us. I never dreamed that Marylynn would fall in love with a little nobody and that Luke would go ahead and have a show produced without Marylynn in it, just to spite her! It didn't even get to New York, but the flop in Washington was bad enough. I knew how desperate he would be and wrote

him that he should try to meet us in Paris and make up his quarrel with Marylynn. I arranged for him to play for our boys in the hospitals, and he came promptly."

Bess stopped her march around the police desk as she remembered the arrival of a very small, heart-breakingly meek and pliant Luke. She had counted on the memories of their early year in Paris to soften all edges and bring them together again. But Paris was not the same, and they were not the same, and it was the meeting of three ghosts in a ghost town, taking ghost walks through the crooked little streets of their youth and along the hungry quays taken over by raucous sight-seeing G.I.'s. For twelve days the three of them were polite and gentle with each other, a thing they had never been before, and then it all blew up in one supercolossal fireworks and eruption which left nothing but a burnt-out lonely silence.

"Well, go on, tell me everything," prompted Dale Corbett. Bess had temporarily forgotten her attorney's presence, so intently had she been back in Paris. "There is nothing else to tell," she said and began marching again. "Luke came and Marylynn refused to go back to him—and that was the end of everything."

To Corbett this was an anticlimax. He had come here to find out what part he himself had played in Marylynn's life. Well, no part at all, it appeared. She had dined with him and smiled at him because he

had raised the money to back their show; she had occasionally employed him as a lightning rod when the pent-up electricity of her marriage became too much for her, and she had used him as a fairly ornamental escort while she was waiting for her sergeant to be discharged. In Marylynn's show he was no more than a well-dressed extra, while he had foolishly believed himself to play the lead. And for this he had jeopardized his career and his future. He felt a great upsurge of sympathy with Poker. Suddenly he understood how she could have wanted to kill Marylynn; he could have killed her himself.

"Let me recapitulate," he said, very much the lawyer. "When Marylynn refused a reconciliation with Jordan and he blamed you for it, you were desperate. The world had come to an end for you. But there's one point I don't understand. Psychologically speaking, you should have shot her then. If you didn't grab a gun in Paris, why yesterday? In Paris you had lost Luke; yesterday, when Marylynn told you that she was married to Crenshaw, didn't it occur to you to catch Luke Jordan on the rebound?"

This was so new and amazing a thought that Bess burst out in a breathless laugh that was almost a sob. "No, it didn't occur to me, neither yesterday nor ever before. That's just it, Dale; swapping Marylynn's life against my own has been bad for me. It has taken from me whatever little self-assurance I might have had before. Marylynn was so much of a woman that

living at her side made me forget completely that, after all, I am a female too. I—catching Luke for myself? He's tramping the hospital corridor even now. He'll never get over being crazy about Marylynn. God Almighty, can't I make you understand that my shooting has nothing to do with Luke? I gave up Luke the day he met Marylynn—I haven't done anything but give him up again and again. I gave him up for good when we parted in Paris—and I didn't shoot. It was the hardest part of the bargain, but I stuck to it. I had given up a lot, I had given up myself, and in the end I had to give up Luke too. But I still thought that I got a fair deal. I'd got all I'd bargained for. I lost Luke—but I still had Marylynn. That meant my share of her success and her glamor and her money and her way of living, free, wide, and handsome. In Paris I could have left Marylynn and gone after Luke and sided up with him and, maybe 'caught him on the rebound'—but I didn't. I didn't let Marylynn down; I kept my part of the bargain. It wasn't an easy decision to make, but I made it.

"And all the time Marylynn, this helpless, useless, lazy little number, was lying to me and keeping her great secret hidden from me; and then last night she comes into my room in her sloppy pink negligee which Luke always detested and tells me, completely cold, that she has been married these last three weeks and that she'll never sign another contract and never sing again—except lullabies for all the babies she wants to

have as soon as possible. Not for a second did she stop to think what would become of me without her. This time she didn't even offer me a guestroom upstairs. After all I had done for her, she treated me as if I were her worst enemy, as if I had stolen her life. 'You've outlived your usefulness, Pokey. Thanks for everything, but this is where I get off.' I still don't quite know what happened to me then. It was like being caught in a landslide, or running with a car smack up against a wall. No ground to stand on, the road washed out, a dead end, no way to go ahead, no way to turn back. I had given up everything—even Luke—for my share of Marylynn's life. When she took that away from me, there was nothing left, nothing. 'If you let me down now I'll kill myself,' I said, and I meant it. She sat down on her bed and told that silly doll of hers: 'Did you hear what Pokey said? She must be nuts.' I took the gun out of the commode, I suddenly had a chill that made me tremble, it felt like black water running through me. When I turned around with the gun in my hand I heard Marylynn laugh. 'Oh, quit it, Pokey—you look so funny!' she called, and that's the last I remember. Everything turned white, and something gave, and there was the smell of powder and I had shot Marylynn."

Bess stopped talking. She took out a fresh clean handkerchief, unfolded it carefully and dabbed a bit of perspiration from her forehead. She looked at the window, she looked at the attorney, she smiled politely.

"It's hot, isn't it?" she said. "Do you think we'll get some rain tonight?"

Corbett got up and caught her hand, which was drenching wet. "I think we've discussed enough for today. I'll outline our next steps, and in the meantime we'll probably know more about Marylynn's chances for recovery. And don't worry too much; you've got a good case. Just don't answer any questions, and stick to the fact that you were unconscious when you fired that gun."

Bess, who deduced that Corbett hadn't understood the core of the whole matter at all, answered only with a somewhat superior and regretful smile. He patted her reassuringly, the way all men used to pat Poker: not like a girl but like a horse. The guard outside opened the door, and Matron Nestler took her back to her cell.

Dale Corbett, never a man to underestimate the power of the press, had himself willingly interviewed by the two reporters who caught him downstairs. He told them that he would plead insanity for his client. And this was the second blunder he made that day and the one that finished him off as a candidate in the coming City Council election. . . .

For some reason the adjective "Old" was inseparably linked with the name of Alan W. Huysmans; he was the Old Man for the staff of his newspapers, the Old Boy to his friends, Old Huysmans to people who

boasted being acquainted with him. There were a selected few who jocularly addressed him as Old Buzzard or Old Bastard. There was also a most unselected majority attaching these names to him quite habitually, seriously, and with a great amount of bitterness. At Yale they had nicknamed him Old Owly, for there had been something musty and unyoung about him even as a student, and this name had stuck to him through his years as a member of the club. But curiously enough, Alan W. Huysmans had never thought of himself as growing older or old. Like every reactionary he felt himself strong as a rock, right in every respect, and perfectly fit to take care of every issue, while the world around him was deteriorating and changing from bad to worse instead of remaining immovable like himself.

However, when he had left the hospital that morning after his outrageous encounter with the second of Marylynn's husbands, he did not feel well at all. A latent discomfort lodging in his veins and nerves had suddenly become very tangible, and on the way to his office he suffered a slight attack of car sickness. He got out of the oppressive confinement of the car and ordered Wallace to meet him at the west gate of Central Park. But the short walk irritated him even more than the drive had done. The trees looked starved and sickish, and the meager grass had been crushed by the hordes of low-class New Yorkers whom the mayor had permitted to spend the heat-wave night in

the Public Grounds. The birds were shrill, there was some very poor horsemanship exhibited on second-rate nags, and the dogs on their morning stroll seemed to suffer from an unappetizing epidemic of diarrhea. Disgusted, he climbed back into the car and drove to the *Star Tribune* building.

Behind his office Huysmans had a room installed that represented one of the few real luxuries to which he treated himself; it was a hybrid between barber-shop and gym, and A.W. turned hopefully to its intricate equipment for relief. It was too hot and he was too tired for the electric horse, but he expected much from a cold shower and massage. However, these too proved disappointing, and he ordered Jeffries, his private barber and masseur, to give him a shave and a facial. While he thus was lying stretched out on his private barber chair, his face in turn rubbed with ice and steamed with hot towels, something happened to him like the delayed explosion of a time bomb.

It was only at that moment that he actually felt the shock he had suffered at Lee Crenshaw's appearance. There was a loud dialogue going on somewhere near the nape of his neck, where, from a heavy, hot center, a terrible headache began to spread; one voice questioning most vulgarly, "What has this Lee Crenshaw got that I'm lacking?" and another voice answering brutally, "He's got nothing, but he's young." Huysmans pulled the towel from his face, pushed Jeffries aside, and went to the full-length

mirror to look at himself. He still did not think that he was old. But for the first time it occurred to him that he wasn't young. A heavy man, naked, with blue veins on his legs and gray hair on his chest. If not being young meant dragging this heavy, listless, joyless, disgusted body through an endless succession of days like this one, then—Huysmans felt—he would have gladly exchanged his whole empire for the slim, merry sixteen years of the office boy who came in with a batch of cables just then.

It was only a second in which the discomfort of a lifetime culminated, and it passed quickly. From then on his day took its usual course: conferences, meetings, listening to reports, dictating letters, attending to formalities, distributing largess to charity institutions, and poisoning a few causes and people that weren't to his liking. He also decided to go on a diet and take off a few pounds. He canceled a luncheon appointment and ordered a frugal tray to be brought to his office. But at the sight of his buttermilk and his banana he was overcome by the same sick revulsion the dogs' digestive products had given him that morning in the Park, and he didn't touch his food. The smell of the hospital still lodged in his mucous membranes, and the taste of his own breath displeased him. At three o'clock he took himself with all his miserable symptoms and malaise to his mother, grumbling about the old lady's whim of staying in the town house during a heat wave. The unadmitted

knowledge that his mother had left the Grange because she expected to die soon and wanted to do so in the old family home on Gramercy Park didn't make him feel any better at all. But no sooner had he placed himself in his accustomed chair in his mother's sitting room than he began to breathe a little easier.

"How are you, my boy?"

"Thanks, fine, Mother, and you?"

"Thank you, excellent."

"Not too hot for you, Mother?"

"I'm glad it's a little warm. Since I'm past seventy I always have cold feet, especially when I'm staying at the Grange. With you it's different, my boy; you work very hard and you are young and full-blooded."

A.W. perked up a bit. "Don't you think I ought to take off a few pounds, Mother?" he muttered.

"Fiddle-faddle! Don't try any dangerous nonsense like dieting. To my mind, a man weighing less than one hundred and sixty pounds looks neither healthy nor respectable and trustworthy."

There ensued a little silence filled with the fine harmony which Huysmans found only in his mother's presence—probably because his mother was the only person who knew that he was a shy, sensitive, and vulnerable youngster. Then he discovered a newspaper resting on the thin knitted rug that was spread over Mrs. Huysmans' old knees.

"Been reading the paper, Mother?"

"Only some of the gossip. You know that I'm a fiend for gossip."

"Our Schreckenbacher writes quite an amusing column, don't you think so?"

"Fairly amusing," said Mrs. Huysmans. "Poor Mary." It was the first time that the name was mentioned between them since the disaster of the broken engagement.

"Poor Mary has gone and made a public spectacle of herself once more. Disgusting," Huysmans said in a cold fury. His mother smiled leniently.

"I wouldn't exactly call it that. She didn't get herself shot by her own choice, did she?"

"No—but she married again by her own choice. And what choice! You should see what type she married this time! The first husband was a decadent, communistic sot. This one is—well—a footballer at best. A cave man. A stallion at stud—if you forgive my saying so, Mother. How do you think I feel when my former fiancée gets herself married to a new man every six months? Life in the rabbit hutch—utterly repulsive. But you always had a foible for her."

"Yes, I always liked her; and she won my respect when she renounced her engagement to you. She's a good, honest woman. She could have married your money and taken a new lover every six months instead of another husband. You wouldn't have preferred that, my boy?"

"Frankly, that possibility hasn't entered my mind,

and I don't feel like discussing it now." Huysmans felt a suffocating anger against his mother to whom he had turned for help and who took sides against him. He looked at his wrist watch and got up. "So sorry, Mother, but I have to be at a directors' meeting of the A.P.F. at three-thirty."

"Don't you want to have dinner with me?" old Mrs. Huysmans asked, scanning his flushed and strained face.

"Thanks, Mother, no—I don't think so. My stomach is a little upset. I think I'll drive out to Oyster Bay tonight and catch up on my sleep."

"Alan," Mrs. Huysmans said as he reached the door, "don't you think you would feel better if you sent some flowers to the hospital?"

"Definitely not. The *beau geste* is not at all in my line."

"That's too bad, my boy—but never mind. I phoned Oyster Bay this morning and bid Ohmsted cut three dozen of your Maggie Vandenholts and had them delivered to Mary. Well, till tomorrow then."

The day dragged on and on. More meetings, more conferences, more highly important discussions with lawyers, bankers, editors, executives, and all of it suddenly without a meaning. More headache, the pressure at the nape of the neck still growing, long after it had reached the point of being unbearable. A few clouds, but no rain.

"How's the Old Man?" the editor Jenkins asked the columnist Schreckenbacher who emerged from the inner sanctum.

"Pretty awful; acting like a poisoned rat."

"How else should a poisoned rat act?" remarked Jenkins. . . .

Shortly after four o'clock Huysmans broke away from his office in some sort of a panic, leaving a minor mountain of unfinished business behind.

"To Oyster Bay, Wallace," he said, because suddenly it seemed to him that a little evening breeze from the Sound was all he needed to feel better. But he was a sick man, turning his hot pillow around and around in vain search for relief. The roaring of traffic on Queensborough Bridge was too much for the pain in his head, which by now had been joined by a hard hot ball wedging itself in between his heart and his stomach. "Turn around and go back to the club!" he ordered. "Yes, Mr. Huysmans," Wallace said obediently and drove on—for there was no turning around in the middle of the bridge. "Don't you hear me? Turn around, goddam you!" Huysmans shouted in a miserable fury. Wallace drove to the end of the bridge, made a loop, and Huysmans had to face for a second time the infernal noise and hustle as they crossed back to Manhattan. Now it was the club which appeared like a blessed island of tranquillity to him.

He took a deep breath as he reached the safety

zone of the big lounge—or rather he wanted to take a deep breath but found his ribs strangely unelastic and his lungs unwilling to co-operate. But it was quiet here and not quite so hot as on the street, although not so cool as in Huysmans' air-conditioned private office. There was a little annoyance when he found his usual chair occupied by a person he didn't know, and for a moment he contemplated returning to his office and seeking refuge in work. At least there he wouldn't have to wonder what people said about him. In the club he felt himself skewered on the curious, hard, and penetrating glances of men of his own caliber. Walking past the large library table where the latest newspaper editions were spread out, he was sure that two such men standing there were discussing him. Both were of his own vintage—Yale 1916—both had false teeth, which he, thank God, had not, and their faces were full of malice. He heard them mention the name of Marylynn; pricking his ears, he walked slowly past them, careful not to be noticed. But they were not discussing him. They were talking about Dale Corbett, and for the first time on this utterly unpleasant day there was a little brightness. "I bet you ten to a hundred that Corbett is finished for good," one of them was saying. "And if they nominate a roaring fool of his kind, so much the better for us."

"Certainly a man who doesn't know how to handle his private affairs can't be trusted with representing the public interest," agreed the other.

"Oh, A.W.," called the first one, "we were just discussing this fellow Corbett. Wouldn't you say that he's washed up?"

"As far as I'm concerned he never had a chance. A cheap publicity hound and not clever enough even for that."

"I wish he wouldn't bring that fellow Ferguson to the club. He is not the sort we want around. Why don't you bring it up at the next board meeting, A.W.?"

"Maybe I will," said Huysmans and walked on.

Now he felt better. He felt so good, in fact, that a few minutes later he went to the corner where Dale Corbett was involved in subdued but heated argument with this fellow Ferguson. "Good afternoon," he said, stopping at their small table. Corbett turned around, and Ferguson, in deference to the powerful opposition, lifted his behind with a little click from the hot leather chair.

"Oh, it's you," Corbett said with a complete lack of enthusiasm.

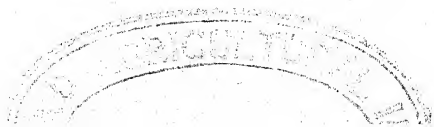
"Too bad the *Herald* lampooned you the way it did; you must admit that the *Star Tribune* never hits below the belt—I wouldn't stand for it. But never mind," Huysmans said, full of thick, false cheer. "I'm an old newspaperman and I know how true it is that by tomorrow morning the people will have forgotten what they were reading tonight."

"You don't think I mind anything that's in the

evening rags about me? As an old newspaperman you'll also know that bad publicity is better than no publicity at all," Dale Corbett replied sweetly. "Of course, I can't compete with you as far as that goes. How does it feel to be presented as a romantic figure and one of the great lovers of all times? Or didn't you see the *Evening Post*?"

Huysmans, owing to his premature escape from the office, had not seen the *Evening Post*. The eagerness with which Corbett produced a tightly folded copy from his breast pocket and spread it out on the little table made Huysmans break out in a sweat. He saw only a blur of many photographs covering most of two pages. But he knew already that something evil was about to happen to him. He managed a patronizing smile. "Of course I saw it—quite amusing, isn't it?" he mumbled, not knowing what he was talking about. The newspaper was suddenly folded up again and spirited into his hands as though by a juggler's magic trick. What had begun as a triumphant attack on Dale Corbett dribbled away as an embarrassed retreat of a beaten one-man army.

By now Huysmans' chair was empty and welcomed him with softly upholstered arms. A highball was put at his elbow, and a cigar was lit for him. He adjusted the reading lamp, turned the broad back of the chair toward the lounge, and, in comparable safety and isolation, he put on his eyeglasses and dared to look at the two pages of the enemy paper. At first sight



they were dull like a family album: a collection of photos titled "The Men in Her Life." It was a most heterogeneous collection and one reeking of bad taste. There were young men, middle-aged men, elderly men; some were slender and handsome, some were bulky of body and—presumably—wallet. Some looked like gangsters, some like floorwalkers, and a few like gentlemen. It was a rather democratic display, for there were names and faces characteristically Yankee and Irish and Jewish and Latin and two or three of that Central European type usually lumped together under the name of "Hunkies." There were a count and a waiter, there was a chief of police, and there was a man now serving his term in Sing Sing for embezzlement and perjury. There were—and Huysmans counted them carefully—eighteen men in all; even the sly captions of the paper didn't go so far as to indicate that Marylynn had had a love affair with every one of them. But here they were, an odd and disgraceful assemblage—and A. W. Huysmans one of them. Fifteen of these portraits formed the frame of the three large and prominent photos in the center: Luke Jordan, Lee Crenshaw; and Huysmans himself.

Huysmans' trained eyes recognized Jordan's as a flattering publicity photo. For certainly the real Luke Jordan never looked as attractive, as interesting, as carelessly passionate as this. On the other side Lee Crenshaw was standing at attention, smart and neat

in his uniform, his cap a little jauntily pushed to one side, his grin as engaging, open, and irresistible as a movie actor's. On his sleeve he had six overseas stripes, and broad as his chest was, his ribbons found barely enough space. And between these two men, A. W. Huysmans found himself: a snapshot exposing him as an abominable specimen in a soaked and wrinkled bathing trunk and making an old baboon's silly threatening grimace at the camera. Suddenly he remembered the perpetrator of this outrage; a fairly unbearable brat of thirteen—Mrs. Somebody's niece and summer guest—who used to hop around the beach, sneak up with a little Brownie camera, take a snapshot when you least wanted it, and depart with a blood-curdling yell.

After Huysmans had taken in every detail of "The Men in Her Life," he folded the paper with great care and then sat for almost five minutes staring in front of him and seeing nothing. He took a gulp of his highball, but there was a foul taste to it and he had trouble keeping it down; he wanted to steady himself and took a deep pull of his cigar, and the next moment he felt as sick as he hadn't since his first attempt at smoking. Quietly he mashed out the cigar in the ash tray and put the highball glass out of reach. He rolled the paper into a tight sausage—suddenly hating the smell of printer's ink that had been part and parcel of his life. He was a little dizzy as he got up, but he successfully navigated the long

voyage to the wastepaper basket into which he dropped the paper with a touch of his old arrogance. This done, he started out for the second stretch of the voyage and, sailing through an even denser fog of dizziness, he reached the men's room.

"Good evening, Mr. Huysmans. Warm day today," said the attendant, a black-faced, white-coated apparition wavering before Huysmans' eyes against an unsteady background of gleaming white tiles.

"Good evening, Washington. Yes, it is rather warm," answered Huysmans, although he was beginning to tremble with a chill that drilled a million needles of ice into his blood. The floor was swaying under him like the planks of a boat in a ground swell. He quickly sat down in a chair that was pushed under his buckling knees.

"Aren't you feeling well, Mr. Huysmans? Must be the heat," Washington's voice said, almost drowned by the hissing of a great waterfall. Now there was nothing left but that ever growing headache.

"I want an Alka Seltzer," said Huysmans. . . .

Bob Simms, the old reporter of the *Star Tribune*, stumbled into the bar on Third Avenue like a very drunk man, although he was sober for a change. Without stopping at the counter he rushed into the telephone booth, put with shaking fingers his nickel into the slot and got Jenkins to the phone.

"SCOOP! SCOOP! SCOOP!!!" he shouted.



"Now listen to this, Jenkins, me lad: Scoop one: When Marylynn came to, she didn't want to see her new husband, she sent for Luke Jordan, the ex. Naturally the husband didn't like that, and they had a fight in which Luke knocked out Crenshaw—yes, you heard me right, Luke Jordan, hundred and forty-eight pounds, against Sergeant Lee Crenshaw, hundred and eighty-two pounds, and that's God's holy truth. I have it from Sid Carp, who got a black eye when he tried to separate them. Scoop two: barring unforeseen complications, Dr. Bassington declared Marylynn out of danger. Scoop three: Marylynn was shot by accident. It was only horseplay, and that Poker girl didn't know the gun was loaded. You can believe that or not, but that's what Marylynn told the police. Now is that a scoop or not? Is it a fifty-dollar scoop or is it?"

There was a silence in the telephone, and Bob Simms could hear the familiar backstage music of the city room. Typewriters, teletypes, ticker tapes, telephone bells; then Jenkins' voice sounding curiously distant and tired.

"Good work, Bobby, but I can top you. We have a thousand-dollar scoop right here in the office. Ten minutes ago the Old Man kicked the bucket."

If Judge Bradley had been a movie actor he would have been exactly the type the casting office would have picked for playing a judge. He had thin wavy

white hair over a good forehead, every wrinkle and line in his face was etched there by a strict parental brand of kindness, and his eyes behind bifocal lenses had an expression of slightly ponderous humor.

"Sit down, Miss Poker," he said, not unfriendly, when Bess was brought into his chambers. "Now we'll have to have a little friendly talk."

Bess was very tired by all the friendly talks she had undergone since last night: with Fowler, with the matron, with Dale Corbett, and now with this amenable personification of American Justice. Everybody seemed eager to help her, but she did not want to be helped. All she wanted was to be left alone, to lie on her cot and to go on with an interminable silent dialogue between herself and Marylynn. She had put her case before a court in which she herself was accused and accuser, defendant and defender, judge and jury. And she found herself guilty on many counts; least guilty when she had fired the gun; and most guilty when she had pushed Marylynn into one success after another—substituting her own vicarious ambition for the girl's simple natural instincts.

"Yes, your honor," she said obediently, sat down and clasped her hands in her lap.

"Miss Poker, I have here," said the judge, "a signed statement by Mrs. Mary Crenshaw, the person against whom you accused yourself of having fired a shot with the intention of killing her. What your real intentions were we shall discuss a little later. First of all I will read you Mrs. Crenshaw's statement:

"At or about 12:30 A.M. on June 21st, 1946, I informed my manager, Miss Elizabeth Poker, that I had married without her knowledge and that it was my definite decision to retire from all and any theatrical, motion-picture, and radio activities. In the course of the not serious argument which followed my announcement, Miss Poker lifted from my desk a Luger pistol used as a paperweight and threatened playfully to kill herself if I gave up my career. This was obviously meant as a joke, as Miss Poker had not, and could not have, any knowledge of the gun having been repaired and loaded. As I tried to wrestle the gun from her, it went off by accident and hit me. I blame myself as much for neglecting to inform Miss Poker of the fact that the gun was loaded, as her for the careless handling of the gun which caused my injury.

"I have no accusation whatsoever to make against Miss Poker and consider her innocent of and not responsible for the unfortunate accident.

"SIGNED: Mary Crenshaw

"New York, June 21st, 1946."

The judge looked at Bess through his bifocals, waiting for a moment to let the statement sink in before he asked: "What do you have to say to this, Miss Poker?"

White-lipped and shaken, Bess heard herself answer: "Nothing, your honor."

Of all the things that turbulently broke into her mind at that moment, there was not one she could have told the judge. It was all between her and Marylynn. It was Marylynn, generous and indulgent, against herself, selfish and uncompromising. It was Marylynn saying: "You see, I'm not as stupid as you thought, Pokey. I know you were desperate. I don't blame you. I know what you did for me all these years, and I know what I did to you when I let you down for good. I can't help it and neither can you. I hit you and I don't blame you for hitting back. Whatever I owe you I'm paying back with this. Let's forget whatever you owe me and call it quits." It was an answer so clear and simple that Bess could almost hear Marylynn's husky, lazy voice speaking these words. Something strange happened to her, something that hadn't happened in many years; it began away down in her spine, rose up to her heart, constricted her throat; it pressed against her ribs and was ringing in her ears and pounding in her temples. It was a great ache and a great relief, it felt like a huge geyser gushing up from deep down and breaking sky-high through the hard crust that had kept it imprisoned. And when the whole enormous, consuming eruption reached its peak, it appeared as a little moisture in Bess Poker's eyes. Her mouth went out of control, and she thought incongruously: Good gracious, it's not your upper lip you have to keep stiff, it's the lower one. She didn't want to act like a blub-

bering fool and burst into tears in the judge's chambers. The sob she managed to suppress emerged as a little hiccup; she smiled apologetically and whispered, "Excuse me, your honor. I think it's raining." The judge turned away from her and gave the little square of dry dusk outside of the window half a minute of serious attention. He kept his smile to himself as he answered, "Indeed, I think it is." By the time he turned back to Bess she had regained a small scrap of composure.

"Now, Miss Poker, the statement I just read to you exonerates you of any culpability in the participation of a crime, inasmuch as it indicates the incident as an accident. No crime has been committed and you are discharged." The judge met her bewildered stare and attempted to translate his verdict into plain language. "You understand me, don't you, Miss Poker? You are free to leave at will. Congratulations."

"Thank you, your honor."

"However," said the judge, "however, Miss Poker, I'm fining you fifty dollars for contempt of court. I'm well aware that you theatrical people would go to any length to grab some publicity. I hand it to you that your self-accusation was a little more original than the old-fashioned jewel-theft story. And I'm certain that it got you very much sympathy and popular acclaim for your client. I appreciate also that you did not promote your stunt for any personal

gain but in the interest of the star who trusted you with her representation. As long as you couldn't make the unfortunate accident undone, you tried for Mrs. Crenshaw—or shall we say Marylynn?—to profit by the noise it stirred up; perhaps you even consider a night spent in a cell and fifty dollars a cheap price for such publicity. So far, so good. But we are busy people here, Miss Poker, and we don't like to be put to such use. I hope you will let this be a lesson not to play with guns and not to trifle with the law, because another time you might not be let off so easily. And now I wish you good luck and a speedy recovery to your client."

The judge got up, and so did Bess. She stood there hesitating, expecting she did not know what, uncertain what to do next. At last she whispered, "Thank you, your honor," and left the room.

The guard, the matron, policemen, police desks, corridors, smell of disinfectant. Congratulations, smiles, handshakes, a flash of Inspector Fowler's face nodding to her with an expression which seemed to say: "I know the truth but I won't give you away." Downstairs a few reporters, one lone photographer, noise, laughter, perfunctory questions, flash bulbs, a mild routine of professional curiosity from which Bess Poker could gauge that she was stale news and that her picture wouldn't get into the papers anyway. For seventeen hours she had been urged to talk about herself, think about herself, she had been the center

in her own drama. But already she had sunk back into the insignificance and anonymity of being just Poker, not more than an appendage to Marylynn—Marylynn who was glorious and amusing and scandalous and always Good Copy. Handling the press with ease and tact had become second nature to her, and she did it well, even in the numbed, dazed trance in which the sudden release had left her. Through the jumble of voices and the blur of faces Bess suddenly discovered Sid Carp, who came bursting through the door and rushed up to her. Sid, a quivering round-faced mess of a little man, breathless, perspiring, with a black eye and a cross of adhesive tape near his chin; Sid, candle-lit window in a blizzard, home fire in a hearth, anchor in a tossing sea; Sid—a friend. He threw a few wisecracks to the boys to chew on, paid off a three-dollar bet on some esoteric topic, gave them the results of the day's races at Belmont, grabbed Poker and pulled her with him. A few minutes later he had her installed in a taxi and they were driving up Lexington Avenue. Only then did Bess realize that an abyss of embarrassment separated her from her oldest pal. "Thanks for getting me out of there," she said tentatively.

"That's all right, Poker."

It was the longest day of the year, but a dense ceiling of low dark clouds had ushered in an early darkness perforated by the honeycombed lights of Manhattan. The roof of the taxi was open, and the

air flapped against their faces like a steaming towel. Bess Poker remembered a very small thing which touched her with such an impact that she thought: I'm getting soft. Twelve years back, a day just as hot as this, and Sid Carp, the office boy, had gone to the water cooler and fetched her a paper cup of fresh water without being asked for it. Across the stretch of years she could still see his boyish face peering over her typewriter. Then, too, he had had a black eye and an adhesive plaster on his face, minor injuries he had received as an umpire in a sand-lot baseball game. Bess held her hand out across the abyss in the tight taxicab.

"You haven't changed, Sid."

"Why should I?"

"Lots of things have happened."

"You're telling me."

Another alien little silence. Bess looked into the palms of her correct white-gloved hands. "Sid, tell me the truth—how is Marylynn?"

"Don't worry, she'll be all right. I had another talk with Dr. Bassington before I left the hospital, and he assured me that she'll be as good as new three weeks from now."

"Thank God—thank God for that."

"Thank God is right. The doctor says she must be made of re-enforced concrete and has an indestructible will to live. That's what did it."

"She has so much to live for," said Bess Poker, who was left without anything to live for at all.

"By the way, she wants to see you as soon as she's allowed to have visitors," said Sid Carp. They drove on, slowly inching forward in the dense evening traffic.

"Sid," Bess Poker said, "Marylynn didn't tell the truth to the police. I knew the gun was loaded. And I did want to shoot her."

"Of course you did. But if you have any sense left, you aren't going to broadcast it."

"But why did she lie for me? Why?"

"How should I know? Better ask Luke. He had a confidential talk with her. I'm only the innocent bystander who gets the black eye."

"You mean she and Luke made up again?"

"That's how it looks from where I'm standing."

"I see," said Bess. "I see." There was a brief silence.

"Do you know that Marylynn never wants to sing again?" she asked afterwards.

"That's the information Mr. Crenshaw gave me."

"Do you believe it? Can you imagine Marylynn as the wife of a boy selling aspirin and hot-water bottles in his father's drugstore in Taunton, Mass.?"

"Yes, Poker, it's tough on us," Sid answered, as though she had asked quite a different question. "We are left out in the cold. Let's all go back to where we came from. For Marylynn it's the small town and the soda fountain, and for us it's another Grayson, Cald-

well & Grayson. Well, it was lots of fun while it lasted."

Bess didn't say anything; her face was a pale olive with the reflection of the first city lights on it. As they waited for the green light at the corner of Fifty-second Street the taxi driver turned around and asked, "Where to now, mister?"

"Where would you like me to take you, Poker?" Sid asked; the lights changed, the traffic cop whistled, and the cars behind them hooted impatiently. "Forty-one Sutton Place South," Bess told the driver, and the taxi turned east.

"Are you sure you want to go there?"

"Perfectly sure, Sid," said Bess. She could not explain to him her urgent reason for returning to the empty house.

"Fishy would have loved to have you come to our place, except it looks as if the baby were getting ready to pop out tonight. Might be a bit too restless for you. I phoned Fishy just before going down to the station house, and she told me that she was getting her things ready—just in case. She wants me to give you all her love."

"For goodness' sake, Sid! Why aren't you with Fishy? Go and get home at once, you fool."

"Aw, that's okay. I'm with Fishy all the time," Sid said, heroically making the supreme sacrifice. "I had to promise Fishy not to get under her feet and to take care of you tonight. Don't you want to have dinner

somewhere? I understand the lobster Newburgh at detention isn't first-rate."

"Thanks a lot, Sid, but I'm not hungry, really not. I'm just dog-tired, don't you see? All I want is to creep into my bed and sleep it off."

"Okay; it's Forty-one Sutton Place," Sid told the driver. Bess fell back into silence. All the time a wheel had been turning in her mind; an obstinate boogie-woogie of thoughts, the same eight beats repeating themselves over and over again: Nothing has changed; I am exactly where I was yesterday when I took up the gun. Nowhere to go. Nothing to live for. Bridge out, road closed. This is not a through street. I was off to a wrong start last night. Tonight I'll finish it off. Sleep. If only my sleeping powders are still there. If only the police didn't take them away. A little brown bottle, still untouched, a coil of white cotton covering the blessed little capsules. She could see that little bottle that had been standing in her bathroom cabinet since Marylynn's attack of a toothache a year ago. She had put Marylynn to sleep with hot compresses and monotonous little stories without the aid of the sleeping powder. But now she would use them; now she needed them for herself; if only the police hadn't taken them away. Fifty yellow little capsules. She could see the small label on the brown bottle: Take one at bedtime.

Take fifty at bedtime and get rid of yourself and this giant toothache called life. Creep in my bed and



sleep. If only the police—but even if the police had taken them away, the old druggist at the corner of First Avenue would sell me some sleeping powder. An old customer with an unbearable toothache. I won't bungle the job tonight. . . .

She noticed the intent yet absent-minded scrutiny of Sid's glance on her face. Poor little Sid. Good little Sid. "What shall it be? A boy?" she asked him, preoccupied.

"I guess I'll take what I get," Sid said, and the cab stopped in front of Forty-one Sutton Place South. Through the transom she saw the light burning in the entrance hall.

"I guess Connie parked herself here for the time being; she thought you might need her," Sid remarked in answer to her questioning glance. "No, I don't need her," Bess said impatiently. Her urge to be left alone grew stronger every second. "Shall I wait, mister?" asked the taxi driver. "Yes, wait," said Bess. She did not know how pale the olive of her face looked under the street lamp, and Sid did not want to show her that he was worried about her. As if he had not enough worries of his own, with Fishy in pains and a baby coming, and his job shot to hell. He took the key from her hand and opened the house door.

"Thanks, Sid—for everything. So long."

"Don't you want me to come in? Won't you even give me a little drink?" he asked, vaguely perturbed, but with every thought already at Fishy's side.

"The hell I will. You should be holding Fishy's hand right now."

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay with you for a little while? Sure you'll be all right, Pokey?"

"Absolutely sure, Pumpkin." If only the police didn't take the bottle away. . . . "I'm keeping my fingers crossed for Fishy. Now scat, boy!"

"Okay, Pokey. Try and sleep it off. I'll call you tomorrow morning."

Bess closed the door behind her and waited till she heard the taxi drive off. The house was quiet and made an innocent face as if the walls had not heard last night's shot and the stairs had never been tramped by the homicide squad. Bess went down the long narrow hall to look into the kitchen for Connie. It would be necessary to get rid of Connie and her motherly fussing. If only the police . . . In the kitchen, too, a light was burning. On the kitchen table a note was propped up against two water glasses:

*Have gone to church—back at 10:30. Good night,
Miss Bess.*

CONNIE

It looked like one of thousands of domestic notes they had exchanged. She picked up the pencil and wrote under it:

*Good night, Connie. Please don't wake me up till
tomorrow noon.*

She went to the icebox and filled both the empty water glasses with ice water to take them upstairs. As she crossed the hall toward the stairs the grandfather clock cleared its throat and gave an asthmatic little cough in an abortive effort at striking the hour. It was eight o'clock as Bess Poker went upstairs.

It was eight o'clock, the hour when the day sounds of the hospital were muted. The last visitor was cleared from the wards, the last dinner tray had clattered down in the service elevator, temperatures were read for the last time, alcohol rubs finished, and pillows shaken up before all pains were hushed for the night by hypos and sedatives. The nurse who had relieved Miss Cripps—an apple-faced young creature by the name of Miss Brindle—stuck her head in the door of Room 35 to look after her patient. Marylynn seemed to be asleep; the room was very tranquil, luminous with the diffused bluish light of the night lamp; Lee Crenshaw was sitting at the bedside exactly as he had been an hour ago, immovable like the trunk of a tree. To remain for a long time without making a move or a sound was just one of the many tricks he had learned in the war.

"Eight o'clock, Mr. Crenshaw," whispered the nurse. "You'll have to go now."

With utmost caution he tried to withdraw his hand from Marylynn's, which he had sheltered up to now

under his tough, warm palm. Marylynn didn't open her eyes as she said almost inaudibly: "Not yet. Please don't take him away."

"It's okay, sweetheart, I won't leave you," Lee said, turning his questioning glance toward the nurse. "I promised I'd stay with her till she was asleep."

"Well, she's been asleep for an hour, hasn't she?" the nurse said; she was a young green nurse and therefore very strict. Lee Crenshaw gave her a bit of his engaging grin and a wink of conspiracy. After a moment's hesitation Miss Brindle softened and returned his wink and grin; girls always did. "All right, I'll give you another ten minutes," she whispered. "But see that she keeps very quiet."

"You bet," said Crenshaw, and the door closed, leaving Miss Brindle discreetly and obligingly in the anteroom. After she was gone, the swimming floating tranquillity grew still deeper. Lee felt Marylynn's fingers twitch under the careful pressure of his own. He tried to make his heavy hand lighter. "Easy, easy there, easy," he said.

"Just want to make sure you're here."

"Where else would I be?"

"For a few hours I lost you out of sight—this morning. It was awful."

"That's what you think. I went right under the anesthetic with you. Nurse says you spilled all our little secrets while you were under."

This seemed amusing news to Marylynn. She

opened her eyes and beamed at him—or so she thought—with the mischievous radiance that had made her famous; but what he saw was only the flickering shadow of a smile on her small, drained face. She closed her eyes again, diving down into the scopolamine twilight where lovely strange shapes were floating in a submarine landscape away beneath the surface of her mind. Breathless like a successful pearl diver, she came up after a few minutes, holding out to Lee the treasure she had found down there. “You are my husband,” she informed him. “We’re married.”

“We sure are; but you oughtn’t to talk so much,” he said, worried by her agitation.

“I won’t. You do the talking. You tell me something.”

Lee Crenshaw was not a talker by nature and felt regrettably inept at the art of self-expression. “Ever held a one-day chick in your hand?” he asked. “Well, that’s exactly like your hand feels; soft, sort of fluffy-like. You know how the little chicks duck a bit as if they were scared, but they aren’t really; they like to be picked up if they know you.” The little simile petered out in an embarrassed silence as Lee realized that it was impossible to express the immensity of feelings Marylynn’s fingers gave him, alive and twitching as they were within the protecting shell of his own hand. But she understood him well enough. “You’ve nice hands,” she whispered happily; “I like

them; so big. I can make them still bigger—as big as a house. I can curl up inside of your hand and close the door and let no one come in. Did you ever play snails when you were little? I did. When I was little I didn't want to be a girl; I always wanted to be a little snail; have my own little house where I could pull in and nobody would find me. They always had to drag me out from under the table or the davenport where I was playing snails."

"You just see you get well in a hurry and we'll have a nice big davenport where we can play snails together to our hearts' content. But don't talk now, Buddy," said Lee Crenshaw, wondering where to put that davenport in the makeshift veteran's home he had acquired so far. Three rooms over a garage, until they could build their own. But he had no doubt that Marylynn would transform them into a perfect paradise, and he rarely suffered any compunctions about the life he had to offer her in contrast to the one to which she was used. He knew Marylynn too well for that. He knew what she needed, and it wasn't spotlights and fanfares, and no mink coats and aquamarines, either; what she wanted and needed was just the opposite, and that, he was sure, he could give to her.

Marylynn closed her eyes in obedient contentment. She felt fine. "Go on," she said, "tell me more." But Lee's store of narrative was exhausted. He had told her a hundred times the fairy tale of their future,

complete, with the sort of kitchen they would get, and the sort of babies, and how he would finish his interrupted studies of chemistry and eventually take over his father's drugstore. The smell of coffee and bacon, the popovers Marylynn would make on a Sunday morning were part of that Song of Songs. The quiet evenings, the car on the installment plan, the super-de-luxe swing under the honeysuckle of the back porch; the entire cozy heaven of the average American as dreamed up and promised in a glowing flood of advertisements.

"But no radio," Marylynn muttered drowsily.

"What's that, sweetheart?"

"I don't think I'd want a radio. I'm fed up with all that," muttered Marylynn, ex-star of the Zip Breakfast Food Hour.

"Anything you say, sweetheart," agreed Crenshaw, whose own idea of paradise included a little workshop behind the garage and a lot of tinkering with radios. Marylynn was quiet for a while, until she found another jewel to offer her husband.

"I never went to sleep with anyone but you," she reported. Crenshaw blushed slowly.

"I didn't ask you, and I don't want to know, Buddy. What you did with your life until we met is none of my business, see? It was your life, and you could do with it as you pleased, that's the way I feel about it."

It was an answer that didn't come easily, yet Mary-

lynn was not quite satisfied with it. "That's not what I mean, Buddy. It would be silly if I pretended that I've lived like a vegetable, just waiting for you. I didn't and you know it. But I mean—I never went to sleep with another man. Not even with Luke, in spite of the fact that we were married. To me it never seemed we were, though; maybe that's why I kept a few things to myself."

There was the shadow of her guttersnipe smile once more. "I always had Emily with me for a chaperon. Luke hated her, the poor ugly tyke. He said she stifled his ardor, that's why I kept her around. Do you know what I'm talking about, Lee? I mean there is something much sweeter and—closer—and finer than just having an affair," she said, trying but failing to put into words that all the panting passions and the breathless mess of infatuation she had stirred up in men had left her core untouched. "I mean just what I say: going to sleep together. You know, talking quietly in the dark and falling asleep in the end, and feeling that you are there all the time, right with me, even while I'm asleep; and maybe wake up once in the middle of the night and there you are, breathing, and wake up in the morning a bit before you and watch you sleep and say 'Good morning, Buddy' when you open your eyes. That's what I mean."

"I know," said Lee Crenshaw, unveiling one of the priceless discoveries of their young marriage. "I can always hear whether you're asleep or not, by the

noise your eyelashes make on the pillow. Like little brushes; and sometimes you talk in your sleep."

"I do? What do I say, Buddy?"

"Nothing that could be repeated publicly," he answered with a pleased male's chuckle.

"You see? That's what I mean. These are the things I kept put away on a shelf, just for you. Now I've told you. Now you tell me something."

"There's just one thing I must tell you, Buddy; and that's how proud I am of you; the way you helped that Poker woman—well, there's no one in the world who'd do what you did. I've been crazy about you from the moment I laid eyes on you, but I didn't know what a wonderful girl you'd turn out to be. I still don't see how you could do it."

Another little smile came and went on Marylynn's face, strangely wise and knowing. "I guess I was just selfish. I couldn't have been happy, with Pokey in jail, could you? I do so want us to be happy."

"Gosh, you sure are tops," Lee Crenshaw said in a not too eloquent outburst of overwhelming emotions. He searched the universe for something he could do for Marylynn—and he found it. "What about your feet?" he asked. "Still a little cold, my poor little feet?"

Keeping his right hand spread over Marylynn's, he stretched a long arm until his left hand found her feet under the chaste white hospital blanket. Yes, they were a bit cold, two small lively animals, and

he began rubbing them in soft, long strokes. To Sergeant Crenshaw warm feet had become something extravagantly precious during the fall spent in the waterlogged foxholes of the Invasion. After a little while he went down on his knees, pressed his mouth upon the blanket, and began breathing his own warmth into Marylynn's cold small feet. Marylynn lay very still, very relaxed, closed into the circle of her husband's sheltering hands and letting his warmth seep into her. In all her life there had never been an embrace as perfect as this.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" she whispered.

"Definitely not. Don't you know the doctor pasted a big label over your chest? Handle with care—Fragile, it says." He laughed softly as she made an instinctive gesture toward her heart as if really expecting to find that sign there.

"But don't you want to?"

"Do I!"

"I'm not much good to you just now. I'm so sorry," she whispered guiltily. "Poor Buddy—and you've waited so long for me."

"What's a bit of waiting between friends? I'm patient."

"But I'm not. I want you to kiss me. I want you, all of you, every minute, day and night."

"Don't talk so much," he said strictly. "We have a whole lifetime to catch up on everything. Now you must sleep."

"Yes, Sarge. But don't go away."

"I'll be right outside of that door; if your feet get cold again just whistle. Now close your eyes and sleep," he said with authority. Marylynn obeyed; her breathing slowed down and her fingers relaxed; her feet were warm and her face serene and peaceful. But when Lee, with utmost caution, tried to slip his hand away from hers she spoke once more—and it was doubtful whether she was asleep or awake yet: "Tell you something funny; the first time in my life I felt real safe was in that foxhole with you. Second time is just now. From now on it'll be always like this."

"Always," said Lee Crenshaw, with a lump in his throat as big as Plymouth Rock.

"Always is a long time, isn't it?" Marylynn said softly.

"I hope it won't get too long for you. I hope you know what you're letting yourself in for. I'm a dull fellow; corny, you know."

"And I'm lazy. I'm a very lazy person and sloppy as hell. And I haven't got a nickel's worth of initiative," Marylynn said drowsily; it was the last faint echo of all of Pokey's preaching, and now she really felt herself falling asleep. Good night, Broadway, she thought; Taunton, here I come. "We'll make a fine couple; we're just made for each other," she heard her husband say, very near and distant at once. All during the air raid he had covered her with his own

body. Now he stood guard over her heart. Now there was no danger any more. Now she would live. "Buddies?" she whispered, nestling securely and protected into her warm cave of sleep.

"You bet: buddies," Lee Crenshaw answered without a sound.

The door opened, and on the threshold appeared Miss Brindle, dutifully signaling to him that his time was up.

Bess switched on the light in her bedroom and went to the cabinet in the dressing room before taking off her hat or gloves. With the urgent compulsion of an addict she was driven toward the small brown bottle and the ultimate relief it contained. The light of her make-up lamp ricocheted, sharp and bright, from the mirrored door which she opened; the narrow shelves appeared untouched, but she could not find the bottle among the backwash of nostrums left there by former insignificant ills. Like frightened white mice her hands slipped in and out among small jars and bottles, and there was a moment of absolute panic as she suddenly seemed to remember that she had thrown away those precious sleeping pills. At last she found them on the uppermost shelf where they had been hiding in a miniature first-aid kit, and as she finally held them between her fingers she felt again as spent and empty as she had the night before after firing the shot. Finding that bottle had been

an end in itself, and Bess had to jerk her thoughts sharply back into focus to remember what it was she intended to do with the pills. She emptied them into a small crystal bowl on her dressing table and began methodically to count them. After she had counted twenty-eight of them she stopped for a moment because she realized that she was trembling and that her hands had grown stiff and cold like frozen meat amidst the suffocating heat of the evening. She looked at these trembling, unwilling hands with a contemptuous smile as if they were quite detached from the rest of herself. Afraid? she thought; who is afraid? Afraid of what? Of the stomach pump, you fool, was the rude answer. Of bungling the job once more; of making a mess of this just as we've made a mess of everything else. We? Who is that We? Not any longer Poker and Marylynn, but Bess Poker all by herself. And yet: We. There was a queer sensation of being split in two parts, with a tug of war going on between herself and herself. There was this creature Poker who had always known what she wanted and knew it even now. Casual, fearless, mature beyond her years, humorous even on the verge of suicide. And there was Bess, a girl no one had ever taken the trouble to know and to unfold; shy, sensitive, emotional; confused, scared, and inexperienced like a fifteen-year-old and all her being oppressed and undeveloped. It was the Poker part of her that wanted to die, unwilling and unable to face the drab

life of the unsuccessful; and it was Bess who wanted to live, who pleaded with a small timid voice: Not yet—it is too early for the end; I've not lived yet. I've gone hungry while you filled yourself with the thrills of a success that was never your own, and I'm afraid to die. Then the crisis of the second subsided and Bess went on counting the capsules up to fifty. She was still trembling, but now she felt nothing but a cold anger against this body of hers. This plain body that had never been anything but a burden which she had dragged through life, an undesired, unfulfilled, unattractive load of bones and flesh and skin that had hampered her at every step and that now, when she wanted to shake it off, proved to be cowardly and disobedient. It was this mounting anger that helped her to regain her control; as she arrayed the fifty yellow capsules into a little hill and carried them to her night table, she had stopped trembling. It's the adrenalin coming up, she thought, almost amused; at last my glands are shocked into action; that's good. Now let's see what comes next.

Dying was a lonely business at best, and everyone had to do it for himself; but at least you could make it comfortable, even luxurious. Bess turned on the faucet of her bathtub, carefully tested the temperature of the water until it was just right for relaxing in a long, soothing bath; then she emptied with a feeling of utmost extravagance an almost full bottle of bathing salts into it. She laughed softly about her-

self when she realized that actually she was not being wasteful but thrifty. It would have been a shame to leave this expensive bathing salt behind. I still don't know how to make a splash, she told herself. I've never outgrown that boardinghouse back in Brooklyn.

Emerging from the bath, she felt refreshed and clean, and after a moment's reflection she sat down in front of her dressing mirror and began to make up her face as carefully as she hadn't done it since the opening of *Why Not Tonight?* It was twenty past nine when she had plucked the last stray hair from the heavy line of her eyebrows and brushed back her expertly blued graying mane. By the time of Connie's return she intended to have it all behind her, lights out, deep, insatiable, complete sleep, and no alarm clock to wake her up tomorrow. She knew that all the while she was only postponing and pushing aside an unpleasant duty; before she could lie down for good she had to face once more Marylynn's deserted room and bed and recapitulate every word that had been spoken, shouted, and screamed last night. This too was a compulsion. She felt herself being perfectly rational; but if Dale Corbett had brought in a psychiatrist to examine her at that moment, he would have been justified in pleading her temporarily insane.

The first thing she noticed as she opened the door to Marylynn's room was a strong smell of cold cigarettes. She frowned, for smoking was taboo in this

velvet-lined little jewel box; a moment later she shook her head about herself and began to laugh. You couldn't expect too much tender consideration for a musical-comedy star's fragile voice by the policemen who were called upon to cart the bleeding body away. Bess did not know what shudders, what shattering remorse, what terrible, pitiless ghosts she had feared to confront in that room; but as she stood there it seemed very commonplace; she found nothing save a great emptiness, a loss that was irrevocable, the let-down after a game played badly. Mechanically she picked up several cigarette stubs from the white carpet and brushed a speck of cigarette ashes from the gleaming satin cover of Marylynn's bed. Otherwise the police had left hardly any disorder, or else Connie had straightened out the room in a hurry. It was a little too quiet in that room because the clock on Marylynn's night stand had stopped. It was a terribly quiet, terribly empty, terribly lonely room; but only when Bess found Emily did the whole impact of loneliness rear up and break down over her like a tidal wave.

Somebody had dropped Emily and broken her face.

Marylynn was alive, but Emily was dead. She was a dead little doll, one side of her stupid head smashed in, and where her sleepless blue eyes had been there were only two black holes left. It did not matter. Marylynn had no need for Emily any more.

Bess knelt down and picked up the broken doll with careful and tender fingers. She had always despised Emily, but now she gathered her up in her lap with great compassion. You're ugly, she told the doll, and you are quite dead and Marylynn won't miss you; never mind, sister, tomorrow I'll be just as dead as you and no one will miss me either. Suddenly there was the sting of the whip again, the lashing pain, the stabbing hurt: "You've outlived your usefulness . . ."

A moment ago Bess had still felt the impulse to collect every little splint and sliver of the injured little china creature, put Emily to bed, tuck her in as Marylynn had always done. But now she took the doll and dropped her without pity into the wastepaper basket. Now she was through with sentimentalities. She was through with being sorry for Emily or for Marylynn or for herself. Now she was ready.

She turned off the lights, left the room, and locked the door. She pulled the thin green silk tunic of her lounging pajamas tighter around her narrow hips as she resolutely went over to the other door of her room to lock this one too. It was necessary to keep Connie out until tomorrow noon at all events. As she turned the key in the lock she had a queer sensation: as if someone were standing outside in the dark corridor, breathing, waiting. She stood still, held her breath, listened. Nothing. The old man with the scythe, she thought, and only half of it was irony.

After her bath she had laid out her best nightgown on her bed, but suddenly it seemed to her more decent to be found in the green pajamas. "I wouldn't want to be seen dead in the sort of black nighties you're fancying," she remembered having said to Marylynn ever so often. No, I'm not the type for seductive chiffon, she thought, holding her mood of self-sarcasm before her like a shield. Of all times this was not the time to let herself get soft. She buttoned her tunic neatly up to her neck, pulled the sash tightly around her thin waist, and tied her hair up with a green ribbon. She hoped she wouldn't toss around too much and look all rumpled and messy in the morning. She intended to be a tidy, well-executed, and thoroughly satisfactory suicide. She sat down on her bed, astonished that only a few minutes had slipped by during recent eternities. Now all lights were turned off except the one on her night table. It shone brightly and innocently upon the yellow little sunrise hill of sleeping powders. It reflected on the ever so faintly trembling water surface in the two glasses expectantly flanking the small crystal bowl. Bess Poker pulled her knees up to her chin, clasped her hands around her ankles, and, freezing into immobility, faced the sleeping powders.

"It won't be easy," she said hoarsely into the breathless quiet of the room. It was not in the program that one of her nervous fits should seize her just then. Cold sweat, choking, trembling, and not a shred

of dignity left to the important moment. Her throat was stone-dry and constricted, and it seemed entirely impossible to gulp down this mountain of sleep. With an effort she forced down a sip of water, yet the next moment her mouth was dry again. Don't be silly, she commanded herself. Dizzily it seemed to her that she heard steps in the downstairs hall and a door softly opening and closing. A panicky tremor ran down her spine. If this was Connie returning, there was no more postponing, no time to lose. She turned off the light, her heart all of a sudden a frenzied jungle drum. A Niagara was roaring in her ears——

And then Luke began playing the piano in the living room downstairs.

Bess knew that it was Luke the moment his hands touched the keys and the first four bars of a song she had never heard before came galloping into her dark room—a clarion call, a challenge, a fierce caress, a sound apart from all other sounds of the world. Bess could recognize Luke's touch as a dog knows his master's scent and a blind man the one dear footfall in a shuffling crowd. She never knew what happened to her during the next thirty seconds, except that she stood in the door of the living room before Luke had repeated the first four bars.

"Hello, Pokerface," he said quietly, neither interrupting his playing nor looking at her.

"Luke—Luke—oh, Luke—you are here—Luke—you are here—but Luke——"

"Sure. Where else should I be when you're in trouble?" he said, playing on and on.

"But Luke—you don't know—you came just in time—you don't know, Luke——"

"No?" he said, still playing, and suddenly Bess understood that he did know, that Luke knew everything and had known it all along.

There he was, so deeply, so rapturously familiar in every smallest line and movement; his long busy fingers on the keyboard, each one of them a forceful and yet tender lover fondling the small ivory and ebony bodies of the keys; the stretched, hard, sparse line of his uplifted chin, his glance fastened on the ceiling in strict concentration; the dear little hollow between the tendons in the back of his neck, as if he were still a hungry boy. His refractory, ridiculous red hair, the great clouded landscape of his face, the inward flame burning through the lank vessel of his body; the knowing melancholy of his eyes, the contemptuous arrogance of his wide mouth, the idiotic, careless stub of a cigarette almost singeing the corner of his lips . . .

"Oh, Luke—how come you are always there when I need you?"

"Yeah? And how come you get yourself in the god-damnedest hell of a mess every time I turn my back?"

"If you hadn't started playing the piano just when you did—the mess would have been much worse," Bess confessed, crushed, smashed, obliterated.

"Really?" said Luke.

All the sleep he had allowed himself during the last thirty-six hours had been the twenty-minute nap on the Carps' davenport. He had spent the day in the hospital, answered Fowler's sharp questioning, racked his brain for some means of saving Pokerface from going to jail; he had knocked out Crenshaw, given poor Sid a black eye, broken into Marylynn's sick-room, taken advantage of her nebulous condition, hypnotized her into clearing Pokey of all guilt. He had made the highly dubitable statement stick with Fowler, he had pried Sid Carp away from Fishy and her labor pains and made him take care of Pokey; and only when he could be sure that Marylynn would live and Pokerface be free had he rushed to the house on Sutton Place to take over where Sid left off. Sitting quietly downstairs, he had hoped to give her time to recover from the shock while he could line up the next few steps. He had listened to the sounds in her bedroom, figured how her mind would work; and, knowing her slightly better than he knew himself, he had suddenly perceived what would seem the only fair way out for a girl of her kind. He had raced upstairs and, standing in front of the door which had been locked in his face, he had spent the most nightmarish minutes of this nightmarish succession of events. He had stood there outside of that locked door, not daring to move, to breathe, not daring to knock or call her name. For God alone knew what

fatal fireworks, what earthquake and final disaster even the tiniest disturbance might set off. Maybe she had another gun; maybe she would pull the trigger again, jump out of the window, blow herself out of this world. There was only one way left of speaking to her without stampeding her into a crazy and desperate suicide. Incongruously he had remembered a newsreel in which some pale, tense, perspiring, and utterly efficient men had removed the fuse cap from an unexploded time bomb in the rubble of London. That's how he felt as he crept down the stairs in the most soul-shattering moments of his life and began to play the piano.

"Sometimes you're lots of trouble, Pokerface," was all he said.

The room stretched full of dusk and shadows, as if it had no walls. There was only the one swimming circle of light from the piano lamp, lifting the keyboard and Luke's hands and the lower part of his face out of the darkness. He was still playing as he turned his eyes toward the door and said: "Don't stand there like Lot's wife; come to me, Pokerface. Come here. Sit down with me and listen. It's a new song." He made a little space for Bess on the piano bench, and she went over like a sleepwalker. The cigarette in the corner of his mouth had burned down to almost nothing, and he let the stub drop onto the floor. Bess reached into the pocket of his coat, found there the expected crumpled package and a book of

matches, lit another cigarette for him, took a few puffs and put it into his mouth. It was a gesture as old as their friendship and blotted out years of estrangement. They slipped away, dissolved, had never been.

"Are you listening, Pokerface?" Luke asked impatiently. She worked herself out of the riot in her heart and listened. "Play it once more," she begged him. "What's it called? Can't you sing the words for me?"

"I guess I'm going to call it 'Out of Bounds,'" Luke answered, playing on and on. "I've got to polish the words some more. It goes into the beginning of the second act."

"Second act of *what*?"

"Of my new show."

"I see. I didn't know you had a show coming."

"Yeah. It's all set for September. I'll tell you everything about it. But now you must listen. There. Just listen." The song ended on an undissolved harmony. "Like it?" Luke asked avidly.

"Yeah, I like it. It's good, Luke. It's very good."

Immediately Luke flew into a rage. "Good? Not more than good? That's not enough. But that's all you can do: criticize! Gripe! Tear down! You're destructive. What's the matter with this song that doesn't please Your Majesty? Or don't you know it yourself?"

"It's where you change the key after the theme comes for the second time. That's where it begins to

sag. Not original enough. You can do better, Luke."

"Oh, hogwash! What do you know about keys and modulations! It's the best damn song I've written in a year! What do you expect from me? Jasmine and rosebuds? Cradle songs? Or what?"

A moment later they were deep in as beautiful a fight as they ever had. Luke pulling his hair, maltreating the pedal with his large feet, pounding out the questionable sequence over and over, glaring at Bess with eyes that were hot with disappointment and striving for ultimate perfection. And Bess silent, shaking her head, obstinately refusing to let Luke Jordan get away with anything that was even a hairbreadth below the best his genius could produce.

"But I'm telling you it's the best I can do. It's much better than the best song in my last show," he cried desperately. Bess only raised an eyebrow, and Luke reached the pinnacle of his wrath. "Okay, okay!" he shouted at her. "So my last show was a flop! You don't have to rub it in. I know it anyway. There was lots of good music in it, all the same! It just wasn't organized well enough. And you ought to know best why it was a flop: because you left me!"

Now it was Bess's turn to get angry. "I left you? I? You mean Marylynn left you! Why blame me for the bust-up between you? God knows, I tried everything in my power to get her back to you, you must believe me, Luke. You think, and everybody thinks, that I had her completely under my thumb. But that isn't

true, Luke. From the day she met that—that husband of hers, I hadn't any influence with her any longer. She isn't the same girl you knew, Luke. She isn't obedient and easy to manage and grateful, oh no! She has discovered what she wants and she's got it all by herself and she's going to hold onto it and she doesn't care a tinker's damn what it's doing to you."

Luke stared at her, his anger giving way to something resembling deep amusement, as he said quietly: "And what makes you think that I want Marylynn back, may I ask?"

"But Luke, you know you can't put over a song without her."

"Oh, can't I? Well, that remains to be seen; that remains very much to be seen." He took his hands from the keyboard, put them on her shoulders and began shaking her. "Stop talking about Marylynn, you dope. I'm talking about you. It's you who left me, and it's you I need, and it's you who's got to see that I don't have another flop."

"Isn't that too big an order? If Marylynn isn't going to sing the lead in that new show of yours, who is?"

"I think we can sign up with Carmen Allison."

"That old battle horse?" Bess said in disgust. "Oh, what's the use? Don't let's kid ourselves, Luke. Without Marylynn we're sunk, both of us. I'm just one half of something that'll never be whole again, and I'm sure you feel just the same. You haven't given such

a good account of yourself since Marylynn left you, that's why it made me so desperate. Last night, after seeing you in the elevator, I had it out with her once again. You don't know how I begged her to go back to you. Well, you know her answer now—and you know what happened then.”

“All I know is that I'm utterly fed up with that Siamese-twin act of yours. Sure, Marylynn is a girl with very sound instincts; when you picked her up she was an attractive hussy as they come thirteen to the dozen on Broadway. But after you had done your Svengali trick with her she was as irritating a fake as I've ever seen, and no wonder you began to hate your own handiwork. I could have strangled her myself ever so often, bless her little heart. And now that she's on her own again she'll let herself grow fat and lazy and sloppy, and she'll fight with her husband about who's going to wash the dishes and take the dog for a walk and they'll live happily ever after. So much for Marylynn.” His hands moved just a bit as he took Marylynn, crumpled her up like one of his empty cigarette packages, and threw her under the piano to the stubs and the ashes. “Marylynn! Forget Marylynn. This is about you and me. Great heavens, Poker-face, don't you know who *you* are?”

“That's all right, Luke. But you're in love with Marylynn,” Bess said feebly. He put the knuckles of his left hand under her chin and tilted her face up. “What do you know about love, kid?” he said, very

gentle all of a sudden. "What do I know about it, for that matter? There are too many articles sold under the name, and most of them cheap imitations. Look, Pokerface, I smoke a lot, but that doesn't make me a fetishist. It doesn't mean I'm in love with my cigarettes, does it?"

"Maybe not. But you certainly couldn't give them up."

"I never tried," Luke said slowly. "But suppose I start trying now." He took the cigarette from his mouth and squashed it out on the foot of the piano lamp. Suddenly his face was very near and very naked, and Bess remembered when she had seen it like that for the first time. The staircase in Brooklyn, the musty smell of the long-ago; Marylynn in her shiny raincoat walking past Luke with her swinging, curving hips, and Luke staring after her. There had been the same expression on Luke's face then: a queer mixture of hunger, rapture, and contempt; amusement, too; and even vulgarity. Suddenly Bess felt terribly weak and terribly young and ignorant; she wanted to run away and she wanted to give in, and more than anything else she didn't want to make a fool of herself. Abruptly she got up and fled into the shadowy depth of the room, where she began running up and down and yet could not run away from herself. She hoped, and she was afraid, that Luke would come after her, take her, kiss her, hold her. But he remained seated at the piano, only roping her

in with his burning eyes that didn't let go of her for a second.

"By the way, did you happen to see the exhibition of Persian miniatures at the Fishbein Galleries?" he asked. It was such a totally unexpected question that it stopped Bess in her tracks.

"No—why? Should I? Why do you ask me?" she muttered in confusion.

"I went there four days in succession. They are the most delicate things you could dream of," he said, absorbedly striking the same three notes over and over. "I fell in love with one of them in particular; it's the picture of a young Persian prince surprising some bathing nymphs. I wanted to buy him, but he isn't for sale."

"That's too bad, Luke."

"Yes. He looks exactly like you. He's riding a horse as red as a fire engine and he wears green pants, just like yours, and he has the same flaring big nostrils you have and the same wonderful long legs and such an impudently proud expression as I've never seen on anyone but you. Exquisite. As long as you had left me, these visits with my Persian prince were the best thing I could do for my mental balance. However," Luke said quietly, and now he left the piano and walked slowly over to her, "however, I don't care for substitutes. Never did."

"Please, Luke—please—don't make fun of me—please," Bess muttered desperately; and then she let

go of herself, let herself be swallowed up by the black-out of their first kiss. For an immeasurable time they stayed down there together, in the whirling, dark depth, until they came up at last, every nerve ringing alarm bells, their bodies unwilling to part, separating slowly, reluctantly, inch by inch. "How I missed you—great God, how I missed you!" Luke said without breath. "It's a hell of a tough break to be in love with a girl like you, Pokerface."

"You are not in love with me, Luke. Or are you?"

"Yes, you dope. With a few detours, maybe, but always in love with you. Always," he said and began stroking her hair; it was a gesture of unexpected, unwonted tenderness that made Bess want to cry.

"It's getting gray, Luke. Don't look at me, I'm ugly," she said, and now she began to cry after all. Because Luke loved her and needed her; because she was ugly and Marylynn was beautiful and because he would forever compare them and never be completely hers; because God was kind and had let Marylynn stay alive and given her a reprieve at the last moment. She sniffed all her grief and gladness back into herself, wiping her nose with the green dolman sleeve of a lovely Persian prince.

"What's the matter now?" Luke asked, perturbed.

"Nothing. It's raining at last."

Outside of the open window there was a stir now and an even, calm rustling; a little gust of air lifted the edge of the curtain and dropped it gently, and a

few tons of steam pressure were taken off the room. Luke was still holding her right hand tightly against his chest, over his strongly beating heart.

"Come, Pokerface, I want to show you something," he said, pulling her to the tall mirror between the windows and turning on the lamp on the small table. "Look at yourself, just have a good look at yourself, Pokerface." Bess threw a shy glance at her reflection in the glass; but if she had expected to look as newborn and changed as she felt, she was mistaken. She saw nothing but the same bony work horse called Bess Poker, a sight of which she was unspeakably tired. "Ugly?" Luke said. "Sure, I remember you as a plain little frump back in the Brooklyn days. But what do you think happened since? Either you've changed a lot, or my eyes have. To me you represent the loveliest collection of bones I ever saw—and beautiful bones don't lose shape and don't go out of fashion." And with that he gathered her up in their second kiss; this one was less like dying and more advanced and full of promise. Outside of the window the rustle of rain was growing into a loud and ever louder crashing down of larger and larger drops, a cloudburst, a flood, a blessed deluge sweeping down from the dark sky onto the dark river.

"Nice crescendo," Luke said appreciatively as he released Bess and took a deep gulp of fresh, sweet moist air, only to clasp her to him once more. But Bess, being Bess Poker, wriggled free. "Let's be sen-

sible, Luke," she said. "We've lots of work to do. Let's snap out of it." Luke let go of her with a reluctant sigh. "All right. Let's," he said as he obediently followed her to the piano. "But then I'll need a drink."

He began playing again while Bess went to the small bar in the corner, where she spent a few minutes in deep meditation, her mind far away from the special rum Collins she was mechanically fixing for him.

"Listen, Luke: Do you remember Birdie?" she asked as she put the glass down on the piano.

"Birdie which?"

"That little redhead who had the walk-on in the opening chorus of *Why Not Tonight?* Don't you remember her? The one who did that split. The one with the skin like buttermilk. Don't you think she had something?"

Luke remembered Birdie for reasons of his own and unknown to Bess. "Oh—*that* Birdie!" he said, suppressing a grin. "Yeah, she sure had something. Well, what about her?"

"I don't know—but it just occurred to me—if we could take her in hand, you and me, I believe we could make something of that girl. Build her up, you know, give her some personality. Why, she'd be ten times better than your Carmen Allison. She has no name, but she's young; we could put Sid Carp to work, put out some clever publicity—she'll do the rest. What are you grinning at?"

Luke gave no answer. Automatically he fumbled with his left hand in his pocket for a cigarette while he kept on playing with the right. Bess struck a match for him, but before she could light that cigarette he remembered something, and, not without a certain formality, put the unsmoked cigarette aside.

"Pardon me," he said. "I forgot that I was going to give 'em up."

Pardon me, but this is where we came in, he thought to himself. He pulled Bess close to his side on the piano bench and went on playing.

